

7/13/08

BARNABAS: ENCOURAGEMENT

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I OVERVIEW OF THE ACTS OF THE APOSTLES

BLUEPRINT:

Peter's Ministry (1:1-12:25)

- Establishment of the Church
- **Expansion of the Church**

Paul's Ministry (13:1-28:31)

- First missionary journey
- Moving of the church council
- Second missionary journey
- Third missionary journey
- Paul on trial

MEGATHEMES:

Church beginnings	Acts is the history of how Christianity was founded and organized and how it solved its issues. The community of believers began by faith in the risen Christ and in the power of the Holy Spirit, who enabled them to witness, to love, and to serve.
Holy Spirit	The church did not start or grow by its own power and enthusiasm. The disciples were empowered by God's Holy Spirit. He was the promised comforter and Guide sent when Jesus went to heaven.
Church growth	Acts presents the history of a dynamic, growing community of believers from Jerusalem to Syria, Africa, Asia, and Europe. In the first century it spread from believing Jews to non-Jews in 39 cities and 30 countries, islands or provinces.
Witnessing	Peter, John, Philip, Paul, Barnabas, and thousands more witnessed to their new faith in Christ. By personal testimony, preaching, or defense before authorities, they told the story with boldness and courage to groups of all sizes.
Opposition	Through imprisonment, beatings, plots, and riots, Christians were persecuted by both Jews and Gentiles. But the opposition became a catalyst for the spread of Christianity. This showed that Christianity was not the work of man, but it was the work of God.

MISSIONS WORK IN ANTIOCH (11:19-21)

At first, Christians scattered over the Roman Empire preached only to Jews. But they eventually began to preach Jesus Christ to Gentiles as well.

(19): The church in Antioch grows as Gentiles turn to the Lord: When the Church accepted Peter's testimony that the gospel was also for the Gentiles (*Acts 10:32-11:18*), Christianity literally exploded into various Gentile areas and large numbers of people soon became believers.

The seeds of this missionary work were actually sown after Stephen's martyrdom when many believing Jews were persecuted and scattered to distant lands and spread the gospel. The initial outreach was to other Jews.

(20): Antioch: Christians deliberately targeting Gentiles for evangelism: It was in Antioch, Syria, the northernmost reaches of persecuted Jerusalem Jews, that Christianity was launched on its' worldwide mission and where the believers aggressively preached to the Gentiles. Believers who scattered after the outbreak of persecution in Jerusalem spread the gospel to other Jews in the lands that they fled to. However, a new paradigm shift was put into motion as the believers now began actively sharing the Good News with Gentiles.

Antioch was considered by many the third greatest city in the Empire, behind Rome and Alexandria. The city of Antioch was known for its sophistication and culture, but also for its immorality; enhanced by the cult of Artemis and Apollo at Daphne.

(21): God honored their effort of mass evangelism as many became new believers: The work of saving lost people is God's work, as witnesses are simply His chosen instruments. The Church at Antioch enjoyed the ministries of Barnabas, Paul, and Peter (*Galatians 2:11-13*). The significance of the Antioch church to the early expansion of Christianity was far greater than the space given to its description.

The Lord's hand was with them, represents His power (*Exodus 9:3; Isaiah 59:1; Acts 4:30*).

The process of growing in Christ is threefold:

1. ***Incoming:*** *Opening one's heart to the Christ that knocks on the door (Revelation 3:20).*
2. ***Indwelling:*** *The ongoing inner presence of Christ by His Spirit. Christ in you (Colossians 1:27) provides the dynamic for living as a Christian in the present world.*
3. ***Outworking:*** *The life of service by which a believer becomes Christ's instrument of doing His continuous work in the world. This working out of salvation (Philippians 2:12) gives outward observable expression to the reality of the indwelling Spirit of Christ.*

MINISTRY IN THE ANTIOCH CHURCH (11:22-26)

The church in Jerusalem sends an able man in Barnabas, previously known for his generosity (*Acts 4:36-37*) and his warm acceptance of Saul of Tarsus after he was converted (*Acts 9:26-28*).

(22): The ministry of Barnabas in Antioch: With the exception of Jerusalem, Antioch played a more important role in the First Century Christian church than any other city. In Antioch, the first Gentile Christian church was founded, and Paul used the city as his home base during his three missionary journeys.

Antioch was also the center for worship for several pagan cults, promoting sexual immorality, and was a commercial center and gateway to the eastern world. This city had similarities and similar issues to the port city of Corinth. The Jerusalem Church sent Barnabas, a man of strong faith, who ministered joyfully with kindness and encouragement, to help the new converts grow in faith.

(23-24): Barnabas rightly focuses on his main job as a leader of the congregation: When Barnabas, the encourager (*Acts 4:36*), arrived at Antioch he saw convincing evidence of the grace of God at work. Barnabas used his spiritual gift of exhortation to assist the Antioch church with its outreach. He was a kindly man, full of the Holy Spirit, as a result of his deep trust and confidence in the Lord and His promises. As a result of Barnabas' influence, many people came to know the Lord and many people grew in the Lord. Barnabas also encouraged another believer when he took Mark with him on a mission trip (*Acts 15:37-39*).

This is the plan for church growth spoken of in *Ephesians 4:11-16*. Leaders in the church dedicate themselves to building strong, healthy Christians. As the saints are equipped for the work of the ministry, they grow into maturity, execute their ministry, and cause growth of the body.

As was true of Barnabas, people who teach new Christians should give evidence that the Holy Spirit is "the Spirit of Truth" (John 14:16-17). His fullness in an instructor helps guarantee that person will speak truth to those whom they teach.

(25-26): Barnabas and Saul work together in Antioch: Now that the Christian church was growing rapidly, it needed additional mentors. With that, Barnabas went to Tarsus to hunt for Paul, whom we hadn't heard from since *Acts 9:28-30*, when he was sent there to protect him from the Jerusalem Jewish leaders.

Barnabas and Paul stayed at Antioch for a year and taught the oracles of God to many of the converts. They could have left for new cities, which they did later, but at this point in time, they were to fortify the Antioch Church. **God is the one who controls the clock.**

The Antioch church was the first church that called itself Christians since they had Christ in common, not race, culture, or language. Christ can cross all barriers and unify all people (Ephesians 2:14-15). The New Testament uses "Christian" in two other places (Acts 26:28 and I Peter 4:16).

MINISTRY FROM THE ANTIOCH CHURCH (11:27-30)

(27): A prophetic announcement of a famine: Prophets were found not only in the Old Testament, but also in the New Testament church. Using the gift of prophecy from the Holy Spirit, their role was to present God's will to the people and to instruct them in God's Word (*i.e., forthtelling*). Sometimes, they like Agabus, also had the gift of predicting the future (*i.e., foretelling*). Prophecy was the second most powerful gift next to apostleship (*I Corinthians 12:28; Ephesians 4:11*).

(28-29): Christians give cheerfully: There were serious food shortages during the reign of the Roman Emperor, Claudius (41-54 A.D.) because of a drought that lasted several years over a wide area (46-49 A.D.). The Antioch Church, although they had very little, still assisted the Jerusalem Church and other churches in Judea. They were motivated to give cheerfully (*// Corinthians 9:7b*), driven by their deep concern for people.

The famine relief offering showed the following:

1. The whole effort was a gesture of Christian fellowship and a Gentile church's outreach to the Jewish believers.
2. Contributions were voluntary and the believers each had to decide to provide the help.
3. Christian stewardship involves caring, voluntary, proportionate, and individual giving.

(30): Barnabas and Paul entrusted to take gifts to the elders in the Church of Jerusalem: In *Acts 6*, elders were appointed in each church to manage the affairs of the congregation. Their main role was to respond to the needs of the believers.

THE CHURCH FACES PERSECUTION (12:1-25)

(1): Herod harasses the church: This is Herod Agrippa I, the grandson of Herod the Great, who ruled in the days of Jesus' birth (*Matthew 2:1-16*). Herod Agrippa I was also the nephew of Herod Antipas, who had a role in the trial of Jesus (*Luke 23:7-12*). No doubt, his persecution was driven by the political popularity for Herod, as it pleased many of his citizens who didn't like Christians. Many political figures are ready to persecute Christians if it will make them politically popular.

(2): Death of the apostle James: This is a new development in the history of the church, as James is the first of the twelve who followed Jesus to be martyred. Jesus promised no special protection for even His closest followers and He warned them to be ready for persecution (*Matthew 10:16-26*). This martyrdom was the fulfillment of that promise for James (*Mark 10:35-40*).

Up to *Acts 12*, the church has been on a "hot streak," experiencing one exciting conversion after another. First there was Saul of Tarsus, then the Gentile centurion Cornelius, then the mixed crowd of Jews and Gentiles in Antioch. But the ugly opposition inspired by Satan again raises its head.

(3-4): Herod imprisons Peter: Seeing his approval ratings rise in the polls when he kills James, Herod seeks to improve his ratings even more when he imprisoned Peter. Herod will deal with Peter at a politically opportune time, fearing an unpredictable mob reaction when Passover pilgrims flood Jerusalem.

Horton suggests three reasons for the delay in executing Peter:

- (1) Herod wanted to show how scrupulously he observed the Passover;
- (2) He wanted to wait until the pilgrim crowds went home, fearing a riot; and,
- (3) He wanted to wait until he had the full attention of the Jewish population.

(5): The church prays for Peter: Herod has his soldiers and his prisons; but the church has the power of prayer. The outcome will be decided easily. Earnest prayer has power not because it in itself persuades a reluctant God. Instead, it demonstrates that our heart cares passionately about the things God cares about, fulfilling Jesus' promise in *John 15:7*.

(6-11): God sends an angel to free Peter from prison: The chains, the guards, and the prison doors mean nothing to God and His appointed messengers as Peter is instantly set free. Peter shows no signs of anxiety as he is able to sleep soundly on what seemed to be the last night before his execution.

Why did James die and Peter find deliverance? God alone knows, as He is sovereign. We know that James, having graduated to glory, did not consider himself a loser. Simply, it wasn't time for Peter to go home yet. It was time for James; it was not time for Peter.

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(12-17): Peter presents himself to the believers that prayed for him: Rhoda is so excited to hear from Peter that she leaves him out at the gate! We are comforted and amused by the little faith of these Christians. Even while they are praying for Peter, they find it hard to believe God actually answered their prayer.

Except for a brief mention in *Acts 15*, this is the last Luke speaks of Peter. We know that Peter later met Paul in Antioch (*Galatians 2:11-14*), and later he wrote his two epistles (*I Peter, II Peter*).

(18-19): The execution of the soldiers who guarded Peter: Herod was furious that his prized prisoner had escaped and execution of the guards was a customary practice. The guards received the penalty that was intended for the prisoners that they guarded.

(20-21): Herod gives a speech to the people of Tyre and Sidon, who are anxious to please him: Herod had been very angry with the people of Tyre and Sidon, and having made Blastus the king's personal aide their friend, they asked for peace, because their country was supplied with food by the king's country. One day, Herod, arrayed in royal apparel, sat on his throne and gave an oration to them.

(22-23): Herod receives praise of the people of Tyre and Sidon, and the judgment of the God he refused to glorify: Then immediately an angel of the Lord struck him, **because he did not give glory to God**, and Herod was eaten by worms and died five days later.

The ancient Jewish historian Josephus also describes the death of Herod in gory detail (*Antiquities, XIX.8.2*).

(24-25): The work of God continues without hindrance: The contrast between Herod and the church is clear. Herod believed he had the upper hand against God's people, but God showed who was really in charge; as Herod is judged and the church is blessed.

Coming back from their relief effort to Jerusalem (*Acts 11:30*), Barnabas and Saul brought John Mark with them back to the church at Antioch. They soon would become the first foreign missionary team.

History is filled with the accounts of men who thought they could fight God and succeed; and their ruined lives are evidence that it can't be done:

- (1) Friedrich Nietzsche was the philosopher who coined the idea that God was dead, and that Christianity was a despised religion of weaklings. Fighting God drove him insane, and he spent the last several years of his life in that condition;
- (2) Sinclair Lewis won the Nobel Prize for literature, and fought against God in his book *Elmer Gantry*. The book was about an evangelist who was also an alcoholic and would sleep with any woman he could. Sinclair Lewis died a hopeless alcoholic in a clinic near Rome; and,
- (3) Writer Ernest Hemingway lived his life of adventure and sin against God seemingly without consequences - until he blew his head off with a shotgun.

Fighting against God just doesn't work, and will never work (*Psalm 1:1-6*).