

## ~ACTS~

## Lesson 36- The Christians of Antioch

## Acts 11:19-26

We are continuing our study through chapter 11 and last week we ended in verse 18 as we saw the Jews in Jerusalem, Luke calls them, “those of the circumcision,” and we see them hear the words of Peter, and they finally accept the fact that the Gentiles too have been granted the same promise of Eternal Life just as they have. And we have been spending some time over the past few weeks learning about God’s plan of redemption to bring the Jew and Gentile together into one body, by one Spirit, in Christ Jesus. As we move into our next section from verses 19-26, with the door being thrust open to the Gentiles, we now see the Gospel begin to spread to the ends of the earth just as Jesus commanded, Acts 1:8.

This next section is the history of the formation of the first church within the body of Christ where uncircumcised Gentiles are being gathered together with believing Jews, and it is here in Antioch that believers were first called Christians, **Acts 11:19-26**.

Since Pentecost, there had been many churches established throughout Judea, Samaria, and even up into other parts of the world... Damascus, Caesarea, and even down to Ethiopia, and in Phoenicia, Cyprus, and Antioch. But up until this point, these churches consisted only of Jewish members. But now for the first time, now that God has broken down this barrier between Jew and Gentile in Acts 10, we see Gentiles and Jews coming together into one church, one body in Christ Jesus, and it all begins in the city of Antioch.

In verses 19-20, Luke begins his narrative describing the formation of this Christian church in Antioch by backing up and giving us a history of the church so far.

**19-20) Now those who were scattered after the persecution that arose over Stephen traveled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus, and Antioch, preaching the word to no one but the Jews only. <sup>20</sup> But some of them were men from Cyprus and Cyrene, who, when they had come to Antioch, spoke to the Hellenists (Grecians), preaching the Lord Jesus.**

This next section that we are studying today is a result of the events of Cornelius. Luke begins verse 19 with a Greek phrase, μὲν οὖν, meaning, “Therefore indeed...” Luke is saying... “Therefore indeed... as a result of what happened in chapters 10 and 11 with Cornelius, these are the events that took place to bring the Gospel to uncircumcised Gentiles in Antioch.” Verse 19 describes what happened before the door was opened to the Gentiles, and verse 20 shows the results after. The events of Cornelius are between verses 19 and 20. And together, these two verses are an historical narrative that gives us some background about the Gospel going up to Antioch, which then leads us to our present time in Acts 11.

In verse 19, Luke brings us back 9 years earlier to the martyrdom of Stephen in 32ad and the persecution that arose from Saul of Tarsus as he launched an all-out assault on Christianity, scattering the church throughout the world. But as we learned in chapter 8, this persecution didn’t stop Christianity. In fact, it did the opposite, what the enemy meant for evil, God turned it for good, Gen 50:20, and the winds of persecution became the catalyst for the Word of the Gospel to be spread throughout the whole world, **Acts 8:1-4**. This is exactly what Luke is referring to in verse 19, **those who were scattered after the persecution that arose over Stephen traveled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus, and Antioch**. This word “scattered,” is διασπείρω, an agricultural term used to thoroughly scatter or sow seed. God is using the winds of persecution to scatter His Word, but notice, in the beginning, these Christian Jews were only preaching the Word to other Jews. Luke says in verse 19... **preaching the Word to no one but the Jews only**. Luke makes this abundantly clear that up until Acts chapter 10, before the revelation that uncircumcised Gentiles could be a part of the body of Christ, the Gospel was only being preached to the Jews. And the churches that are being established, even as far north as Antioch, are only made up of Hebrew and Hellenistic Jews.

But as we just learned, God broke down this final barrier and the Gentiles were brought into the body of Christ. So Luke says... μὲν οὖν, “Therefore indeed...” Now that word has spread that Gentiles are now accepted into the body of Christ, Hellenistic Jews begin preaching the Word to Gentiles as well.

**20) But some of them were men from Cyprus and Cyrene, who, when they had come to Antioch, spoke to the Hellenists (Grecians), preaching the Lord Jesus.**

Now, because of the events in Acts 10, the door has been opened to the uncircumcised Gentiles and men from Cyprus and Cyrene start preaching to pagan Greeks. The NKJV says they spoke to Hellenists, but this word Hellenists has caused some confusion because normally when we think of a Hellenist, we think of a Hellenistic Jew. But that is not what Luke is referring to. He is not saying that Hellenistic Jews from Cyprus and Cyrene went to Antioch to preach to other Hellenistic Jews. This would not have been anything noteworthy. This had been happening for almost 10 years now. The word Hellenist in a general sense meant “one who has adopted the Greek culture and language,” one who has been Hellenized. This general term does not speak specifically of Jews. It’s anyone who speaks and lives as a Greek. In Alexander the Great’s time, the whole known world was Hellenized because as he conquered the world, the world began conforming to his Greek ways of life. So, it wasn’t just Jews being Hellenized, it was the entire world. The NKJV version translated this word, Ἑλληνιστάς, correctly as Hellenist, but a better translation to avoid confusion might be “Grecians,” which is how the KJV translates this word. These were uncircumcised Greeks receiving the Word just like Cornelius.

**21) And the hand of the Lord was with them, and a great number believed and turned to the Lord.**

This was ordained by God. Notice God is building His Church and He is using faithful men to do so. These men from Cyprus and Cyrene were men of God, and we don’t even know their names, but yet they were faithful men who were led of the Spirit and **the Hand of the Lord was with them** as they sowed the seeds that started the first church with Jews and Gentiles. There will be so many unsung heroes in heaven just like these men that we don’t even know, but God knows them, and we will have the pleasure to meet them in heaven.

The Hand of the Lord was with these Jews from Cyprus and Cyrene as they spread the Gospel up to uncircumcised Gentiles in Antioch. And notice the results... **a great number believed and turned to the Lord**. We don’t know how many this is, but it is probably thousands. It’s enough to get the attention of the church in Jerusalem...

**22) Then news of these things came to the ears of the church in Jerusalem, and they sent out Barnabas to go as far as Antioch.**

It is at this point in the book of Acts that we start to see Luke transition his focus away from Peter and the Apostles at Jerusalem and focus his attention toward Paul and the church at Antioch. As we will see in the book of Acts, Antioch becomes the main hub of the Gospel and Christianity, so I think it is important to spend some time getting familiar with the history of this city.

This city is known as Antioch of Syria, not to be confused with Antioch Pisidia further west. It is about 330 miles north of Jerusalem. A prosperous city, positioned on a major trade route on the Orontes River leading out to the Mediterranean Sea. In the first century, it became the third largest city of the Roman Empire, having a population of 500,000 people and being outranked only by Rome and Alexandria.

This city was primarily a pagan society, being a melting pot of Greeks, Romans, and even people from the orient. But there was also a population of Hellenistic Jews living here who had settled in this region as a result of the Babylonian Diaspora in the 6<sup>th</sup> century BC. Antioch was first established in 300BC by the Seleucid king, Seleucus Nicator, one of Alexander the Great’s generals. Alexander the Great had conquered the majority of the known world and Hellenized these countries. And after his death in 323BC, Seleucus

took over the majority of Alexander the Great's kingdom, and it became known as the Seleucid Empire. Seleucis established Antioch as the capital of his kingdom and named the city after his father, Antiochus. This city was the capital of the Seleucid Empire for nearly 250 years until Rome finally took it over in 64BC.

There is an interesting connection between the Seleucid Empire and the Hellenistic Jews, because after Seleucis took over Alexander the Great's kingdom, there were thousands of Jews scattered throughout his empire as a result of the Diaspora. But by the hand of God, Seleucis granted favor to these scattered Jews and showed compassion on them, to the extent that Seleucis gave the Hellenistic Jews who were living in his empire citizenship within his kingdom. This was God's favor on His people, and it was this favor that spread the Hellenistic Jews even further west into Galatia and Ephesus and Troas. This was the hand of God on His people preparing Salvation to come to the world. Because many of these cities happen to be some of the same places that Paul traveled to as he spread the Gospel to the Gentiles world.

Paul always went into the Jewish synagogues first, but have you ever wondered why there were Jewish synagogues in these remote Gentile places? It is because God gave His people favor with this Seleucid king and they were granted citizenship into the Empire. You can just see God setting things up for His Son to come into the world. And how God was providentially working within the kingdoms of the world to fulfill His plan of redemption. Using vessels of dishonor, power hungry men like Alexander the Great and the Seleucid kings as a means to bring forth His Salvation to the world. In fact, you remember Alexander the Great was even foretold in the Prophet Daniel as the "goat" that came out of the west in Daniel 8:5. This was God working the schemes of men into His perfect plan of redemption.

Remember the angel told Daniel that he had to go and fight with the prince of Persia. And then he says, indeed the prince of Greece will come, Daniel 10:20. This was God providentially preparing the way for His Son and the Gospel to go out to the world. Just like God used Pharaoh and Nebuchadnezzar as dishonorable vessels to advance His purpose, so likewise He used Alexander the Great and the Seleucid kings to do the same. It is so fascinating to see how God weaved all this into His plan to bring in the fullness of time for His Son to be born. Remember in Galatians 4:4 Paul says, "When the fullness of time had come... God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the Law." This was God providentially setting the stage for His Salvation to come to the world. Alexander the Great and the Seleucid kings set up Antioch, along with all these other Hellenistic cities scattered throughout the empire. And this became the avenue for the Gospel to spread to the Gentile nations: the Greek language; the roads and passageways of Rome; the Hellenistic synagogues spread out all over the world... all in perfect order so the Gospel could be spread to all the nations.

And Antioch, along with all these other Hellenistic cities scattered throughout the empire, became the avenue for the Gospel to spread to the Gentile nations. This has been the plan of Salvation from the beginning. We see this with the promise to Abraham and then it was foretold in the Prophets, like Daniel and Isaiah and many others, all coming to this point to bring Salvation to the world.

It is very interesting to see how God chose this pagan city of Antioch to preserve His people and to be the major hub from which the Gospel would shine forth to the world. But that's what God does... He shines His Light in the darkness. It is from this point in chapter 11 of the book of Acts that we see the gospel begin to explode to the Gentile world and the city of Antioch becomes the home church for the Apostle Paul and Christianity.

And even centuries later, God chose Antioch to be the city to preserve His Word from the corruption of the Gnostics. Because it was through faithful men in Antioch in which God preserved the Textus Receptus, the pure, uncorrupted Greek writings of the New Testament. And even through these dark times, when the enemy was trying to corrupt the Bible, God had His remnant preserving His Word in Antioch, and

then later these manuscripts were moved to Byzantium in Constantinople, and His Word was kept safe from the corruption of the enemy. And now only the KJV and NKJV are the only modern Bibles that are translated from these pure Antiochian/Byzantine manuscripts which we know now as the Textus Receptus.

So, getting back to the book of Acts in verse 22...

**22) Then news of these things came to the ears of the church in Jerusalem, and they sent out Barnabas to go as far as Antioch.**

The Jerusalem church hears the news of the Gentile believers in Antioch, and they send Barnabas, the Son of Encouragement, Acts 4:36, to check things out and edify these new converts. This was his gift, comforting, exhorting and edifying the believers. We have already seen this a couple of times in the book of Acts when he sold his land in Cyprus and gave it to the church, . And when he became Saul's advocate in Jerusalem to speak with the Apostles. Another reason to send Barnabas is the fact he was a Hellenistic Greek speaking Jew from Cyprus. He could probably relate to the Greek Gentiles better, and in addition, remember it was men from Cyprus and Cyrene who planted the seeds of the Gospel in Antioch, and Barnabas was from Cyrene, so there is probably some commonality there. But the main reason why Barnabas went to Antioch is because the Holy Spirit sent him. And Barnabas, being led of the Spirit, would bring Paul into the ministry as the Apostle to the Gentiles.

**23-24) <sup>23</sup> When he came and had seen the grace of God, he was glad, and encouraged them all that with purpose of heart they should continue with the Lord. <sup>24</sup> For he was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and of faith. And a great many people were added to the Lord.**

When Barnabas gets to Antioch, Luke says he **had seen the grace of God, he was glad**. He saw the grace of God! There was tangible evidence that these Gentiles have received Salvation. What did Barnabas see? My thought is he saw the love of God manifested among the Brethren. There is nothing like it. It's the love that we have for one another, the bond of perfection in Christ. I think this is what Barnabas is seeing among these Gentile converts. He is seeing new Life in Christ.

After he quickly realizes this is the real thing, notice Barnabas, the Son of Encouragement does what he is known for, **he encouraged them all**. παρακαλέω, to call alongside, to admonish, to encourage to comfort. And then in verse 24 Luke adds a few more details to the character of Barnabas... **For he was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and of faith**. Barnabas was a good man of God, led by the Spirit and full of faith. Sounds a lot like Stephen, Acts 6:8.

And notice how he is encouraging them in verse 23... **that with purpose of heart they should continue with the Lord**. He is telling them to set their hearts as first-place toward the Lord. To literally abide toward the Lord, προσμένω. That in everything, we place Jesus as first in our lives, we abide toward Him. We endure and remain in Him, constantly setting our heart toward Him. He is encouraging them to set their focus on Jesus Christ.

Notice the results of his encouragement in verse 24... **And a great many people were added to the Lord**. This word "added" is not a great translation. This gives you the sense that people are being added in number to the church of Antioch. And that is happening, we were told that in verse 21 when Luke says, **"A great number turned to the Lord."** But here Luke says a great many people were προστίθημι, "set toward" the Lord. Barnabas was encouraging them to set their hearts as first-place and abide toward the Lord, v.23. And that is exactly what a faithful shepherd does for his flock. He sets their gaze toward the Lord. That is the purpose of the shepherd, to keep the Bride's eyes always fixed on the Groom. Never let them

stray, keep their hearts and minds fixed on Jesus Christ. This is what verse 24 is saying... A great many people were set toward the Lord.

**25) Then Barnabas departed for Tarsus to seek Saul.**

Here in Antioch, Barnabas sees these uncircumcised Gentiles receiving Salvation. Thousands are coming to the Lord, so Barnabas decides to get help. And instead of going back to Jerusalem, being led of the Spirit, Barnabas remembers Paul in Tarsus and he goes and brings him back to Antioch. The last time Barnabas saw Paul was 4 years ago after he had to escape Jerusalem and head back to his home town of Tarsus. But Barnabas was there in Damascus with Saul, he heard his testimony, he knew God had called Paul to the Gentiles, and now the door has been opened and the opportunity was here. So, after 4 years, Barnabas ἀναζητέω, he eagerly seeks after Paul in Tarsus. Antioch wasn't that far away from Tarsus. That's no coincidence. This is God setting this whole thing up. God had his Apostle to the Gentiles patiently waiting for his call, Gal 1:21-24.

**26) And when he had found him, he brought him to Antioch. So it was that for a whole year they assembled with the church and taught a great many people. And the disciples were first called Christians in Antioch.**

No longer does Luke distinguish between Jew or Greek. He says that for a whole year Paul and Barnabas **taught a great many people**, both Jew and Gentile alike. And the result: **the disciples were first called Christians in Antioch.**

Now in Antioch, this is truly the first Christian church with both Jews and Gentiles coming together in one body, by one Spirit, being made a new man in Christ Jesus, **Eph 2:14-18.**

This word Christian, Χριστιανός, Christianos, has a fascinating history. It is common in the Greek language to add endings to root words, and we see this with the word "Christian." Χριστιανός is made from the root word, Χριστος, and the Greek suffix, ιανός. This Greek suffix, ιανός, comes from a Latin suffix "ianus," which was used in ancient Rome to identify an adoption into a culture, and it usually had the sense of a cultural hybrid. There are examples of this in ancient Roman literature when Greeks would become Roman citizens and their name would change by adding the "ianus" on the end to reflect their Roman citizenship The Journal of Juristic Papyrology vol. xlv (2015), pp. 45–63, Nico Dogaer. We see an example of this with the Roman Emperor Diocletian. Before he was the emperor of Rome, his Greek name was Diocles. But when he became emperor, his name was changed to Diocletianus- Διοκλητιανός or Diocletian as we know him today. This added suffix was also used in the military when soldiers would enlist into the Roman army, many times they would take on the "ianus" ending in their name. This name change would also occur to identify a group of people who were devoted to a specific leader. Such as the Herodians who were devoted to Herod. They were called Herodianus- Ἡρωδιανός. Mark 3:6; Matt 22:16, taking on the name of their king.

So it is very fitting that we too, who have been adopted into the family of Christ, have taken on His Name as Christ**ianus**. Our name reflects our adoption, our citizenship, our enlistment into His army, and we as Christians are taking on the name of our King, Jesus Χριστος Christ. It is a special honor to take the name... Christianus, Χριστιανός. And to let the world know unashamedly that...

"I am a Christian"