



JULY 18, 2021 | PASTOR TIMOTHY SONG

## “Marks of a Growing Church” (Acts 11:19-30)

<sup>19</sup> Now those who had been scattered by the persecution that broke out when Stephen was killed traveled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus and Antioch, spreading the word only among Jews. <sup>20</sup> Some of them, however, men from Cyprus and Cyrene, went to Antioch and began to speak to Greeks also, telling them the good news about the Lord Jesus. <sup>21</sup> The Lord’s hand was with them, and a great number of people believed and turned to the Lord.

<sup>22</sup> News of this reached the church in Jerusalem, and they sent Barnabas to Antioch. <sup>23</sup> When he arrived and saw what the grace of God had done, he was glad and encouraged them all to remain true to the Lord with all their hearts. <sup>24</sup> He was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and faith, and a great number of people were brought to the Lord.

<sup>25</sup> Then Barnabas went to Tarsus to look for Saul, <sup>26</sup> and when he found him, he brought him to Antioch. So for a whole year Barnabas and Saul met with the church and taught great numbers of people. The disciples were called Christians first at Antioch.

<sup>27</sup> During this time some prophets came down from Jerusalem to Antioch. <sup>28</sup> One of them, named Agabus, stood up and through the Spirit predicted that a severe famine would spread over the entire Roman world. (This happened during the reign of Claudius.) <sup>29</sup> The disciples, as each one was able, decided to provide help for the brothers and sisters living in Judea. <sup>30</sup> This they did, sending their gift to the elders by Barnabas and Saul.

### INTRODUCTION

Good afternoon, Church. Today we will be continuing in Acts. So if you have your Bibles, please open to Acts 11. Today I want to focus on verses 19-30, but before we read, last Sunday, Pastor Woo Hyun took us through Acts 10 where we read about the transformation of Peter. It’s an important chapter that is sandwiched between Saul’s conversion in Acts 9 and today’s passage.

Now to quickly recap, here’s the context. In chapter 10, we have two characters: Cornelius and Peter – one is a gentile, and the other is a Jew. This is significant because it describes the social tension that existed between the two. Jews and Gentiles did not get along with each other. Even Christ’s disciples and followers could not break the barrier and wall between the two communities, but Jesus had a different plan. His plan for salvation was not restricted to just one particular people group. No. He had bigger plans. And He is revealing it to Peter and to the rest of the world more and more.



Go back and listen to the sermon. It's found on our website, but it's through God working in Cornelius and purposefully sending Peter to him that opens Peter's mind and heart to see that the Gospel is not just for the Jews but also to the Gentiles. The Gospel was preached, the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on Gentiles (just like Peter and the apostles at Pentecost). And then he said, "Surely no one can stand in the way of their being baptized with water. They have received the Holy Spirit just as we have" (10:47). So, the Gentile believers were baptized, and Peter stayed with them for a few days.

Now we get to Acts 11. The apostles and the Jewish believers heard what Peter had done. He stayed with the uncircumcised (or the "unclean") and fellowshiped with them. This did not sit well with the believers in Judea. They criticized Peter. So, Peter spends the first 18 verses sharing the vision from God and what had happened. Listen to what he says at the end: "As I began to speak, the Holy Spirit came on them as he had come on us at the beginning. Then I remembered what the Lord had said, 'John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.' So, if God gave them the same gift he gave us who believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I to think that I could stand in God's way?" (11:15-17). And when the apostles and Jewish believers heard that, there were no objections and, check out what the response was: they praised God saying, "So then, even to Gentiles God has granted repentance that leads to life" (11:18).

This sets the stage for what's going to happen, so please follow along as I read Acts 11:19-30.

[Read Acts 11:19-30]

This is the word of God. Try to recall the things that have happened so far in Acts. Jesus ascended to heaven but promises the Advocate, the Holy Spirit. The Spirit comes upon the Apostles and others and thousands were saved in Jerusalem. As the community of believers grew, persecution arose and the believers in Jerusalem scattered. Jewish believers dispersed into Samaria and Judea. Remember, the thesis of Acts and Jesus' purpose for His disciples is found in 1:8 in which Jesus told His disciples, "But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth". It's through persecution and the dispersing of believers that begins the movement of the Gospel. We've read of individuals like the Ethiopian eunuch, Saul, and Cornelius and his family being converted, but now, for the very first time, we have a Gentile community, a church, being formed in Antioch! This is monumental! This is the beginning of a missional movement!

You know, as I was preparing this sermon, I thought a lot about what we, as a community, have been going through. It's been a season of transition and change. I can't say that it's been easy, but as I kept meditating on this passage, I asked myself this question: What is the church? The pastoral staff has been reading a book called, "Nine Marks of a Healthy Church" by Mark Dever. I'm going to borrow this idea and I'd like to share three "Marks of a Growing Church" exhibited by the Antioch Church. And these three are necessary in all churches, including ours. So, let's start with the first mark.

## MARK #1: THE CHURCH PROCLAIMS THE GOSPEL (EVANGELISM).

Look with me in verse 19. It says, "Now those who had been scattered by the persecution that broke out when Stephen was killed traveled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus and Antioch, spreading the word only among Jews". Phoenicia is present-day Lebanon. Cyprus is an island about 100km off the northeast Mediterranean coast. It's also where Barnabas was from (4:36). And Antioch, which was the capital city of Syria, was the third largest city in the Roman Empire behind Rome and Alexandria with a population probably around 500,000. For reference, Antioch would have been like Canada's Vancouver (only behind Toronto and Montreal).



So, Jewish believers have dispersed into these cities, but notice that they spread the word only among Jews. They were still showing favouritism and only sharing with fellow Jews, but I love this. Verse 20: "Some of them, however, men from Cyprus and Cyrene, went to Antioch and began to speak to Greeks (same word for Gentiles) also, telling them the good news about the Lord Jesus. It took divine intervention to persuade Peter to take some action, but here we have some men, without any issue, casually approaching strangers, and Gentiles for that matter, and sharing Christ to them.

Brothers and sisters, imagine if these men did not go and share the Gospel to the Gentiles in Antioch. There would be no church there! The Church proclaims the Gospel! These men were preaching to people who never heard about Jesus and telling them who Jesus was. And people were hearing and believing! The church was formed because the Gospel was preached, and a great number of people believed and turned to the Lord (v.21).

So, what is the Gospel? This is an excerpt from Mark Dever's book:

The good news is that the one and only God, who is holy, made us in His image to know Him, but we sinned and cut ourselves off from Him. In His great love, God became a man in Jesus, lived a perfect life, and died on the cross, thus fulfilling the law Himself, and taking on Himself the punishment for the sins of all those who would ever turn and trust in Him. He rose again from the dead, showing that God accepted Christ's sacrifice and that God's wrath against us had been exhausted. He ascended and presented His completed work to His heavenly Father. He now sends out His Spirit to call us through this message to repent of our sins and to trust in Christ alone for our forgiveness. If we repent of our sins and trust in Christ, we are born again into a new life, an eternal life with God. At the very center of the Gospel stands the great exchange of Christ's righteousness and our sin. His substitutionary, in-our-place death on the cross is the heart of the message. It is meaningless to speak of accepting or receiving Christ if we do not believe this message and rely on Christ completely and alone for our salvation.

This is the Gospel! Does this stir in your heart such joy knowing you've received this gift of salvation? Does your joy abound that you can't keep it to yourself but need to share with others? ILLUSTRATION: The joy of hearing/seeing members share the Gospel to the people around them. A few weeks ago, a member invited all their coworkers to church and for most of them, it was the first time going to church. How amazing is that?! Evangelism can happen during Sunday Worship. The Gospel is being preached. If you are with us and not a Christian, I pray that as you just heard the Gospel, God is speaking to your heart right now, but, the believers were going out and seeking people to share the Gospel with. Notice that all believers shared the Gospel. Some shared it with Jews. And some shared the Gospel to the Gentiles, but regardless, the Gospel was proclaimed.

I found this quote very convicting. It reads this: "We must recognize the importance of this good news of Jesus Christ. Until we do, we can learn nothing helpful about evangelism. Evangelism will be no more for us than an unpleasant duty or an occasional impulse, but when the message of the cross captures our hearts and captivates our imaginations, our tongues, stammering, halting, insulting, awkward, sarcastic, imperfect as they may be, won't be far behind. As Jesus said, 'Out of the overflow of the heart the mouth speaks' (Matthew 12:34)."

APPLICATION: Brothers and sisters, what is your heart full of? What would it look like if we had people so excited about the Gospel that we all leave this place after worship and go and proclaim the Gospel to our family, friends, coworkers and even strangers? How exciting would it be to have people gather here in this sanctuary filled with our members and believers but also those who are not Christian because you shared the Gospel to them, and they want to hear more about Jesus? Church, when was the last time you were so in awe of Christ and the power, grace-filled promise of the Gospel that it compelled you to share with others?



We must be a church that proclaims the Gospel and not just in our singing here in the confines of the church walls and in our fellowship where we feel safe. We must go!

That's the first mark of the church: The Church proclaims the Gospel. The second mark is that the church is transformed by the Gospel.

## MARK #2: THE CHURCH IS TRANSFORMED BY THE GOSPEL (CONVERSION AND DISCIPLESHIP).

There are two ways in which the church is transformed by the Gospel: (1) in our vertical relationship with God and (2) in our horizontal relationship with one another. Where do we see this? Well, let's start with our vertical relationship with God. Follow along with me in verse 21: "The Lord's hand was with them, and a great number of people believed and turned to the Lord". As the Gospel was preached, many heard and believed and were saved. People were turning away from their sins to Jesus. Their lives turned 180 degrees. This is conversion. This is a vital and necessary mark of the church: people being brought to Christ in repentance and faith.

The church in Jerusalem heard of what was going on in Antioch and sent Barnabas to investigate. Now, Barnabas was not one of the apostles or a deacon who was appointed. He was a member of the church. He was from Cyprus. And he was sent to Antioch. Now, what follows is beautiful. Verse 23 says: "When he arrived and **saw what the grace of God had done**, he was glad and encouraged them all to remain true to the Lord with all their hearts". What does the grace of God do? Barnabas was able to see the grace of God in how these Gentiles, who were once viewed as the opposition, are being transformed by the Gospel. Think of what he would have seen... He saw the evidence of God's grace.

What does he do? He rejoices. He rejoices in what he saw and then he encourages them. He encourages them to remain steadfast and cling to the Lord. He did this because he was a good man and a man full of the Holy Spirit and faith (v.24). He was a man of character. And because he had faith, he had the confidence and assurance to know that this was the work of God.

The Gospel really does transform us. God has made us all, each and every one, with a capacity to know, love, and serve Him (Dever, 109), but it starts with acknowledging that we were once alienated from God. Like the Gentile believers in Antioch, we must turn from our sins and to God. We must repent of our sins and follow Jesus. Dever writes, "Conversion includes both the change of the heart toward God that is repentance, and the belief and trust in Christ and His Word that is faith".

Ephesians 2 reminds us that we were dead in our transgressions and sins (v.1). We all lived gratifying the cravings of our flesh and following its desires and thoughts. We were deserving of God's wrath, but, and here's the beautiful message of the Gospel, "But because of His great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions – it is by grace you have been saved".

## APPLICATION:

We must rejoice in what the grace of God and the Gospel does in our lives and in the lives of others. Our response to the Gospel must be rejoicing and praise! Remember the response of the Jewish Christians when they heard Peter share what had happened to Cornelius. They praised God. What would it look like if we had more Barnabas' in our church?

Each of us are transformed in our vertical relationship with God by the Gospel. And we come together to form the church, but the church is also transformed in our horizontal relationship with one another.



God used some men who first came to Antioch to share the Gospel and now Barnabas to encourage the believers in Antioch, but he realized that something was needed. Look with me at verse 25: “Then Barnabas went to Tarsus to look for Saul”. Barnabas realized that the people needed someone who can teach them. Barnabas can encourage, encourage and encourage, but they needed teaching. So, he went and brought Saul to Antioch. And for a whole year, both of them stayed and ministered. What does this tell us? We all have gifts. We may all have different gifts. And each of us must use the gifts that God has given us for the advancement of the Gospel and the growth of the church.

As the church grew in number, Barnabas and Saul’s focus was on teaching the new believers the Word of God. Their example is an important one for the Church today, including ours, to follow! Teaching the Word of God is at the heart of the church’s ministry. This is discipleship. The apostles in Acts 6 made clear that teaching the Word is the highest priority of church leaders. That’s why they appointed deacons to take care of other needs of the community. We continue to grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord Jesus through His Word.

Together, we are the body of Christ. And the believers in Antioch were united and were called Christians meaning “belonging to, or following, Christ”. This is the first time in the Bible Christ followers are called Christians. This signified unity among all believers, whether Jew or Gentile. We are all one in Christ.

#### APPLICATION:

Brothers and sisters, what gifts has God given you? Are you using your gifts for the advancement of the Gospel and transformation of the church? Think of what Barnabas did. He knew his giftings: it was encouragement, but he knew that the new converts needed to be taught. So he sought after Saul. What humility! Do we consider what is best for the church? Can we let go of any pride and celebrate and rejoice when we serve together? Are you able to give up the spotlight? Or perhaps you need to move into the spotlight more.

Another way in which the church is transformed by the Gospel in our relationship with one another is through generosity. At the end of today’s passage, a soon-coming famine is prophesied (v.28). This famine would be so severe that it impacts the entire Roman Empire, but it seems like Judea was hit harder.

We know the tension between the Jews and Gentiles, but what did these Gentile Christians do? They didn’t think of themselves as Gentile Christians or see the believers in Judea as Jewish Christians. They saw one another as Christians! That’s what the Gospel does! It brings unity. What did they do? They sent the Christians in Judea money (as much as they were able to) to help them during the famine. There was no Jew or Gentile. There were only brothers and sisters. The church in Antioch demonstrated love. And only then can such generosity be expressed. ILLUSTRATION: Hoarding during the pandemic. Immediate reaction is not to give.

Paul’s exhortation to the Philippi church was to “conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the Gospel of Christ” and “...stand firm in the one spirit, striving together as one for the faith of the Gospel” (Philippians 1:27). Here are some things the Bible teaches us to do with one another:

- Love one another; care for one another physically and spiritually
- watch over one another and hold one another accountable
- work to edify one another; be examples to one another
- bear with one another; forgive one another
- pray for one another
- keep away from those who would destroy the church
- reject evaluating people by worldly standards
- contend together for the Gospel



ILLUSTRATION: There are so many evidence of generosity in our community.

## APPLICATION:

We call our community CoaH (City on a Hill). Do you remember where we get that name? It comes from Matthew 5:14-16. Jesus said, “You are the light of the world. A town [or city] built on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead, they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven”. Brothers and sisters, are we living up to our name?

We promote the Gospel by cooperating to take it to those who have not yet heard it, and by making the Gospel visible to the world through how we live. Those not yet saved may see us, and they may see something of the Gospel. As imperfect as we are, if God’s Spirit is genuinely at work in us, he will use our lives to help demonstrate to others the truth of his Gospel (165). The church is transformed by the Gospel. That’s the second mark. And here’s the final mark: The Church is led by the hand of the Lord.

## MARK #3: THE CHURCH IS LED BY THE HAND OF THE LORD.

Verse 21 says, “The Lord’s hand was with them, and a great number of people believed and turned to the Lord”. The hand of the Lord represented God’s blessing. And the result of Christ’s hand is that many people were saved.

God’s sovereignty was over the persecution of believers and used as a catalyst for the Gospel to be sent and proclaimed. When the church wanted to remain in their bubble, God’s sovereign hand led believers to go and disperse into areas in which God ordained so that others may hear and believe the Gospel. God brought persecution of the church to disperse them. There was a missionary stall. By necessity, as the church is dispersed, the Gospel will also be dispersed.

## APPLICATION:

Our church is going through a tough transition. Perhaps God is speaking and wanting to lead each of us to follow and obey in His plans and work. This is a wake up call for us.

It is God who is at work. He uses persecution sovereignly to execute His purposes in the world. And in this particular situation, it was to disperse the church so that they would begin fulfilling the Great Commission.

God was also sovereign in bringing the Gospel to places that are difficult to go into. It would be in Antioch where Paul and Barnabas would be sent out. This church would be the center, the launchpad, for the greatest missionary movement the world has ever known and that is how God works. Could you imagine how God can use City on a Hill to be a launching pad for the city of Toronto, to the country of Canada, and to the ends of the earth?

The hand of the Lord also shows us grace. Grace turns people into givers. Look back at the Antioch church. They heard of a need, and they opened their hearts and their wallets. Why? Because they have been brought to Christ, the Gospel has transformed them, they have surrendered to the lordship of Christ. And they had new priorities that shaped their lives. All of this was possible because of the hand of Christ was leading and guiding their lives so that for the very first time, regardless of who it was, they were generous.



## APPLICATION:

The Lord is with us. He is fighting for us. He is sovereign and at work even when we don't see it. Even when we don't feel it. He is working!

## CONCLUSION

### Questions:

1. How are we to take the Gospel and respond? God tells them what's going to happen.
2. How can we bring blessing to our brothers and sisters?
3. How has God enriched me? By that measure, I will seek to enrich others.

To really hear the Gospel is to be shaken to your core. To really hear the Gospel is to change and be transformed. By the way, the first, second, and third missionary journey we read in the Scriptures of Paul going and proclaiming the Gospel to cities and regions in which people never heard the name of Jesus Christ, it all started in Antioch and it's because of this that we are all Christians here today. Let's be reminded of what must be at the forefront of our church: the Gospel and Christ is, and will always be the One who leads us by His hand for His glory.

Let's pray.