

O Church Arise: Through the Book of Acts

Gospel Growth & Gospel Fruit (Acts 11:19-12:25)

Preached by Pastor Jason Tarn at HCC on June 7, 2015

Introduction

- ❖ As we've been walking through the book of Acts, we noted back when we studied chapter 1 that Luke, the author, essentially provides for us a table of contents in chapter 1:8, "*But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.*"
 - ▶ You can break down Acts into three sections. First, the gospel takes root in Jerusalem. That's the focus of **chapters 2-7**. At one point, their opponents accuses them of filling the entire city of Jerusalem with their teaching about Jesus (5:28). Peter and Stephen are primarily highlighted in this section.
 - Second, in **chapters 8-12**, we see the gospel, ironically spread by persecution, radiating out of Jerusalem all throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria. Peter is still a central character, but there's also mention of Philip and Saul. Third, from **chapters 13-28**, the focus completely shifts to Saul (now called Paul) and his missionary journeys to the ends of the earth.

- ❖ So within the context of the larger book, today's passage functions like a transitional chapter. Where earlier plot lines get wrapped up, new plot lines emerge, and important pieces are set in place in preparation for a final push to the ends of the earth.
 - ▶ After chapter 12, Peter essentially drops of the story line. He only has a brief cameo in chapter 15. The spotlight is squarely on Paul. And a new church begins to take on more prominence, the church of Antioch.
 - **What's new, in comparison to the church of Jerusalem, is that this becomes the first multi-national, multi-cultural, multi-ethnic church reaching pure pagans who had no prior interest in the God of Israel.** And it ends up as a launching pad for the first wave of worldwide missions.

- ❖ This is a very pivotal passage. **It gives us a picture of the gospel growing and bearing much fruit even in the soil of adversity.** Right before Luke shifts our attention to the ends of the earth, he emphasizes in chapter 12:24, that in spite of all the challenges and hardship the church is facing, "*But the word of God increased and multiplied.*"
 - ▶ **Now if you're like me, you want this church to grow.** You want your small group, your fellowship, to grow. And by that we mean in terms of people. We want people to grow in depth in their relationship with God, but we also want to grow in breadth, in number, in size. We want **people growth** in both senses.
 - But the whole point is, if you want that to happen, we need **word growth**. The word of God, the message of the gospel, needs to grow in our church and bear much fruit.

- ❖ What I want to do this morning is to show you the fruit of gospel growth. As the gospel grows and expands, as the word increases and multiplies, it produces: **1) A church that makes the gospel visible (11:19-30). 2) Christians on God's mission and not their own (11:22-26). 3) People who are hopeful and prayerful even in the face of adversity (12:1-25).**

A Church That Makes the Gospel Visible

- ❖ As the word continues to grow and bear fruit, we see it produce the Antioch Church. A church that proves to be faithful and fruitful in making the gospel visible. **By that I mean the claims of the gospel – gospel propositions and principles abstractly proclaimed in word – were being made tangibly visible in deed through their life together as the church.**
 - ▶ Look in v19. It begins by resuming where Luke left off in chapter 8 where we were told that a great persecution rose up against the church, and it scattered believers everywhere beyond the comforts and familiarity of Jerusalem and Judea.
 - We're told here that some traveled into Phoenicia (modern-day Lebanon), the island of Cyprus, and Antioch (the capital of ancient Syria). But these disciples only preached the gospel to the Jews. But then more disciples arrived from Cyprus and Cyrene (North Africa), and they began preaching the Lord Jesus to an entirely new audience.

- ❖ **Up to this point in the book, gospel preaching had only been going out to the religious.** People still lost without the gospel, but nonetheless they were religious people. Those who tried to lead pious lives. Who feared God and sought after him. Obviously this describes the **Jews of Jerusalem**. When Philip visited **Samaritans**, he preached the gospel to those who at least revered the books of Moses. When he evangelized the **Ethiopian eunuch**, he was talking to a man seeking the God of Israel and studying Scripture. When Peter preached Christ to **Cornelius**, he was talking to a God-fearer who read the Bible and tried to live it out.
 - ▶ But now we're told in v20 that, for the first time, the gospel was preached to Greeks. It says they spoke *“to the Hellenists also, preaching the Lord Jesus.”* By Hellenists, in this instance, Luke is referring to Gentiles who had no prior interest in the God of Israel. Those whose lives were characterized by rampant ideology and immorality.
 - **So instead of just being preached to the religious, the gospel was now going out to the irreligious.** To pure pagans. Who weren't God-fearing, who weren't seeking him out. But it says in v21 that *“the hand of the Lord was with them, and a great number who believed turned to the Lord.”*

- ❖ **Now the question is how does this dynamic found in the church of Antioch – a fruitful gospel ministry among the irreligious – make the gospel visible?** Think about it. If a church is hesitant to offer someone the gospel of free grace unless that individual is pious, unless he's showing signs of spiritual sensitivity, unless he's actively searching for God – if you reserve the gospel for only those individuals – that sends a clear signal.
 - ▶ **It says salvation may be free but should only be offered to those deserving.** To those putting up an effort to seek God. Those trying their best to be good. Don't waste it on those who seem to care less about God and religion.

- ❖ But that goes against the very heart of the gospel! **The gospel says religious people – those who live piously – are no closer to God on their own compared to the irreligious.** They're both far from God. All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God (Rom. 3:23).

- ❖ Years later, Paul would write to the Romans and belabor this point. That Jews (the religious who have and observe the Law) are no better off than Greeks (the irreligious who don't know or observe the Law). Both are under sin (Rom. 3:9). That means whether you grew up going to church, reading the Bible, practicing religion, living a moral life OR you grew up with no religion, no biblical knowledge, and a life marked by immorality – both lives are under sin.
 - ▶ **For both Jews and Greeks (both the religious and irreligious), our only hope is to be justified by God's grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus** (Rom. 3:24). Who offered up his life as a propitiatory sacrifice that bore the wrath of God set against our sin and unrighteousness (Rom. 1:18). That through faith we might be declared righteous and reconciled to God.
 - Not on the basis of our own righteousness, our own piety or morality. Otherwise the religious among us would have a greater claim to Christ and his salvation. No, the basis of our justification is Jesus and his righteousness, which he offers as a free gift to be received by faith alone.

- ❖ **So when you have a congregation filled with justified sinners who were once lost in their impiety and irreligion worshipping alongside other justified sinners who were once lost in their piety and religion – that sends a clear signal.** That says God's salvation in Christ is available to all peoples no matter how your parents raised you, no matter how religious you are, no matter how long or hard you've been seeking after God. You can come to him by believing and turning to the Lord Jesus. That core message of the gospel was made visible in the life and makeup of the Antioch church.

- ❖ But there's another aspect of the gospel made visible here that's worth noting. **Namely, the shared identity and unity we have as fellow believers in Christ. A unity that transcends our national, cultural, and ethnic differences and allegiances.**
 - ▶ It doesn't matter which flag you salute, what language you speak, or where you or your ancestors are from – what ultimately matters is that we have received the same baptism by the Spirit and share in the same righteousness of Christ given by grace through faith.

- ❖ You could get this message just by looking at this congregation in Antioch. **The thing about the city of Antioch is that it was truly multi-national, multi-cultural, and multi-ethnic.** It was the third largest after Rome and Alexandria. Among the population were obviously Romans and Greeks. And because of its location, you also had lots of Syrians, Phoenicians, and Jews. There were also Africans, Arabs, Persians, and Indians among the inhabitants.
 - ▶ **We're told there were at least 18 different ethnic quarters.** The builders of the city knew it was going to be diverse and thus have lots of cultural and ethnic tension. So not only did they build walls around the city to protect the citizens of Antioch from outsiders, they built walls within the city, separating these ethnic quarters, to protect the people from each other.
 - But as the gospel grows in the city, something new begins to happen. **People from all the various quarters of the city began to walk past these walls and congregate to worship the same God.**

- ❖ *How do we know this?* If you look at the beginning of chapter 13:1, we're introduced to leaders of the Antioch church. Barnabas (a bi-cultural Jew from Cyprus). Simeon who was called Niger (Latin for black, so a black African). Lucius of Cyrene (in North Africa, so not black but more like Arabic). Manaen a member of Herod's court (someone in the elite class). And of course Saul (who we know as Paul, a Jew of Jews). If these were the prophets and teachers of the church, then imagine the makeup of the congregation!
 - ▶ This is why it says in v26 that "*in Antioch the disciples were first called Christians.*" That's not a name they gave themselves. Throughout Acts, they were fine calling themselves, *disciples* (6:1), *saints* (9:13), *brothers* (9:30), or just *believers* (10:45). It's likely the people of Antioch coined this phrase calling them *Christ-ians* (cf. Acts. 26:28; 1 Pet. 4:16) since they were always talking about Christ.

- ❖ *But why the need for a nickname? Why come up with this new label?* Because the people of Antioch couldn't peg these disciples with their normal labels. They didn't fit the normal categories. **Up until that point, every nationality or ethnicity had its own religion.** If you're Roman, you've got your Roman religion. If you're Greek, your Greek religion. If you're Syrian, there's Syrian religion, and of course if you're Jewish, you've got Jewish religion.
 - ▶ **But now in the church of Antioch, we see a mixture of different nationalities and ethnicities all worshipping the same God, sharing the same religion.** And the people of Antioch are at a loss for words. They don't know what to call these people. There's no one nationality or ethnicity that stands out as dominant. So they come up with a new label. **Those are *Christians*. Because the one dominant feature among them all is all their talking about this man they call Christ.**

- ❖ Church, this is how we can make the gospel more visible to the world. **The world believes that religion is simply a function of your culture.** If you grew up in the West with Christian parents, then you're Christian. If you grew up in Pakistan with Muslim parents, you're Muslim. If you're from an Asian country with Buddhist parents, you're Buddhist. You are what your parents are. Your religion is a result of your culture. But Christianity transcends all these lines.
 - ▶ The gospel says to a follower of Jesus that you can be proud of your nationality or ethnicity, you can love the culture in which you were raised and seek to retain aspects of it in your own life and family – but if you're in Christ, then you're bound by his Spirit in a union with other believers that transcends all those differences (Eph. 4:3).

- ❖ **I believe this unity is what Barnabas saw when he arrived to see what was happening in Antioch.** It says in v23, "*When he came and saw the grace of God, he was glad.*" What did he see? He saw a culturally and ethnically diverse congregation united under Christ. And realized that's only possible by the grace of God in the gospel. That's what made him glad.
 - ▶ *Would it make you glad for the grace of God to shape our congregational life in the same way?* So that the gospel becomes more visible among us. So the world can see the gospel's power to save and unite a people together irrespective of our former religiosity or of our religious and cultural upbringing. They'll catch a glimpse of the power of the gospel and its availability to save them too if they believe and turn to the Lord.

Christians on God's Mission and Not Their Own

- ❖ Because that's our mission. We want to see those who were far from Christ be made into followers of Christ, disciples of all nations. And as the gospel grows among us, that kind of mentality grows and begins to drive us in a new direction. Before Christ, we were all on our own mission, driven by our own agendas.
 - ▶ But what we see in Barnabas' example is what the gospel can do as it grows and bears fruit in our lives. This is our second point. **The gospel produces Christians on God's mission and not their own.**

- ❖ Let's read in vv23-24. "²³When he came and saw the grace of God, he was glad, and he exhorted them all to remain faithful to the Lord with steadfast purpose, ²⁴for he was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and of faith. And a great many people were added to the Lord."
 - ▶ We were introduced to Barnabas back in chapter 4:36. His name was Joseph, but the apostles nicknamed him Barnabas because he was such an encourager. The name means "*son of encouragement*". We saw that spiritual gift at work in chapter 9:27 when he went out of his way to take in the newly converted Saul whenever everyone else in the church was scared and suspicious of the former persecutor.

- ❖ **And now there's another opportunity to reach out to those being marginalized or looked at with suspicious eyes. He gravitates towards such people.** He has such a big heart, so he was the perfect person to send to Antioch to evaluate what's going on there.
 - ▶ Just picture the scenario. Everyone in the church, both in Jerusalem and Antioch, recognized that Barnabas was a good man, full of the Spirit and of faith. A great many people were coming to the Lord. He was a well-respected leader in a multi-national, multi-cultural, multi-ethnic growing church in the third largest city in the Empire.
 - Barnabas is in an enviable position that so many pastors can only dream of today. *But what does he do?* **He gladly gives away ministry influence and prominence and willingly takes a backseat to a younger man named Saul.**

- ❖ Look at vv25-26, "²⁵So Barnabas went to Tarsus to look for Saul, ²⁶and when he had found him, he brought him to Antioch. For a whole year they met with the church and taught a great many people."
 - ▶ Barnabas was quick to look past Saul's notorious past and to view him in light of the gospel. Barnabas saw great potential in Saul, and probably heard of his unique calling to the Gentiles. So he traveled to Tarsus to search high and low for the man.

- ❖ As soon as he found him, Barnabas brought Saul to Antioch, and they shared a teaching ministry for a year. And because of that, from this point on in the storyline, **Barnabas begins to retreat into the background while Saul (later Paul) grows in prominence.**
 - ▶ You can actually see this in the way Luke addresses the pair. In chapter 11:30, 12:25, 13:2 we read of "*Barnabas and Saul*", but eventually by middle of chapter 13 it shifts to "*Paul and Barnabas*" (cf. 13:43, 46, 50). And yet I think Barnabas is fine with that.

- ❖ **Barnabas was not on a mission to build a name for himself.** He was on a mission to build a church in Jesus' name, and so he had no qualms with sharing a growing and fruitful ministry so long as God's mission was being accomplished.
 - ▶ Barnabas was willing to admit his ministry limitations and his need of assistance from others with different gift sets than his own. He gladly gave away ministry and prominence. He put the need of the church and the mission of God ahead of his own advancement, his own reputation, his own glory.

- ❖ *Honestly, what would you have done?* If you were a leader in the church, or in your fellowship, or in your small group, and if you had in your hands a growing ministry where a great many people were getting saved and wanting to be taught and disciplined AND if everyone was looking up to you to lead them – what would you do?
 - ▶ **Would you gladly find others to help you, to share the load? Would you gladly give away ministry?** Give away influence and control? Give away prominence to someone else who's gifted differently or even more gifted than you?
 - Many of us (myself included) take too much upon our own shoulders. And we excuse our lack of delegation or lack of sharing ministry on our personality or forgetfulness. We know we should but we haven't.

- ❖ But deep down, for many of us, the reason why we're slow to share or give away ministry and ministry influence/prominence is because we like to take credit when the gospel grows and bears much fruit. **We need to preach the gospel to ourselves, and remember our identity rests not in the fruitfulness of our ministry or in the fame of our reputation** but in the righteousness of Christ who loves us irrespective of how large or prominent our ministry gets.
 - ▶ We want to be a church that's on God's mission and not our own. **That's why we're trying to develop a culture here at HCC where every leader is intentionally giving away ministry and equipping others.** We're not here to build our kingdom but his. So if you're a leader, in any capacity, ask yourself: *How am I doing in giving and sharing ministry, in equipping others to reach their potential? What's one thing you can do even this month to put an aspect of your ministry into the hands of another?*

People Hopeful and Prayerful Even in Adversity

- ❖ There's a third point to raise. As the gospel grows in a city and in a church, **it produces a people who are hopeful and prayerful even in the face of adversity.** We see this fruit of the gospel in chapter 12, which we'll cover in a broad sweep. In v1 we're introduced to King Herod Agrippa, the grandson of Herod the Great (who sought to kill baby Jesus) and nephew of Herod Antipas (who presided over the trials of both John the Baptist and Jesus).

- ❖ Now we're told that he laid violent hands on leaders of the church. We're told he was trying to please the leaders of the Jews who still had outsized influence in Jerusalem. So he had one of the Twelve, James the son of Zebedee, the brother of John beheaded by the sword. And along with James, he arrested Peter and intended to do the same to him. Look at v5. *"So Peter was kept in prison, but earnest prayer for him was made to God by the church."*

- ▶ If you recall, this is Peter's third arrest and imprisonment. He already miraculously broke out of jail by angelic assistance back in chapter 5:19. **And so it makes sense, that the church's immediate response is to pray to the Lord of angelic hosts.**

- ❖ We're told in v6 that Herod was extra cautious. Normally it was enough to handcuff a prisoner to one soldier. But extra precautions were in place. Peter was handcuffed on each wrist to two soldiers, while two others stood guard outside his cell. We're told in v4 that there were four squads of four guards each. And they would've taken three-hour shifts to last through the night.
 - ▶ **Charles Spurgeon** was quick to note how it was like battle lines being drawn in a spiritual war. He said, "*As soon as Herod had but Peter into prison the church began to pray. Herod took care that the guards should be sufficient in number to keep good watch over his victim, but the saints of God set their watches too. As in times of war, when two armies lie near each other they both set their sentries, so in this case . . . too. Prayer was made by the church without ceasing . . . and when some were forced to take rest in sleep, others were ready to take up the blessed work of supplication. Thus both sides were on the alert, and the guards were changed both day and night.*"¹

- ❖ So as the gospel bears fruit in a church, it produces warriors – not of the sword – but of prayer. These believers were hopeful and confident in prayer. **But they were under no illusion to think just because we organize a prayer vigil that's going to guarantee Peter's rescue.** They understood prayer is not a means of appeasing God or turning his hand. I'm certain they prayed for James when he was arrested, but clearly things didn't go as they hoped.
 - ▶ Yet this time around they still resolved to pray. Because they knew they were praying to a sovereign and good God who actually listens. Who answers every prayer we lift up. But not necessarily in the way we would expect. **So prayer is meaningful even though at times the results are mysterious.**

- ❖ Now notice Peter himself, handcuffed between two Roman guards. What is he doing? He's sound asleep! And it was such deep sleep that he didn't stir when the angel appeared in shining light. He had to nudge Peter awake.
 - ▶ I don't know about you but if I were sandwiched between two guards, awaiting my execution after one of my best friends experienced the same fate, I'd have a hard time falling asleep. But Peter seems to possess a supernatural peace in the face of adversity.

- ❖ With the help of an angel, he escapes and goes directly to Mary's house and knocks on the front gate. What ensues is a bit of biblical humor. Rhoda a servant girl is sent to check, and she's so overjoyed to hear Peter's voice that she forgets to open the gate. Leaving him standing outside.
 - ▶ She runs back to the prayer meeting and tells everyone that Peter's here. **And the irony is that they think she's crazy as she's telling them that their prayers were answered.**

¹ C.H. Spurgeon, "A Special Prayer Meeting" in *Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit*, v. 21, 437.

- ❖ Eventually she opens the door and everyone is filled with joy to see Peter. He tells them to be quiet, to pass on the word, and then he disappears – not just from Jerusalem but essentially from the book of Acts.
 - ▶ The chapter ends with an account of Herod high on himself, imagining himself to be a god. But he ends up in the dirt, struck down by God and eaten by worms. And the chapter ends in v24 saying, “*But the word of God increased and multiplied.*”
 - Consider the plot twist that takes place in chapter 12. It opens with the church under attack. James dead. Peter arrested. And Herod increasing. But the chapter ends with Herod dead. Peter free. Disciples emboldened. And the word of God, the gospel, increasing and multiplying.

- ❖ **Church, take hope no matter what adversity we’re going to face in our ever secularizing culture that grows ever more hostile to Christianity.** There’s nothing that can stop the advancement of the gospel. Nothing that the world can do to hinder its increase and multiplication. “*“The grass withers, and the flower falls, but the word of the Lord remains forever.” And this word is the good news that was preached to you.*” (1 Pet. 1:24-25).
 - ▶ The gospel will grow. And it will bear fruit. But the question is: *Will it be among us? Will it happen in our church and our lives?* If that’s what we want, then the gospel must take center stage every time we gather. We mustn’t assume everyone knows it so there’s no need to mention it. **The gospel will only consistently grow among us if it’s consistently proclaimed among us.**
 - Let’s make it a goal that no small group, no fellowship meeting, no worship service or Sunday School class takes place without mention and attention being placed on good news of God’s grace to all in and through Christ – a saving grace that’s received by believing and turning to him.