

than to own the whole world. Every thing below must one day be left behind. We came into the world naked, and we must leave it the same way. But godliness has value for the time to come. Treasures in heaven will never rot or fade away. Let us fix our eyes on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make it our goal to please him. Let us make sure that we know if we are saved, and then seek to bear fruit for him.

Let us see thirdly what the church did when it was in such trouble. It prayed. It did not despair, or lose heart. It turned to God. We are told what kind of prayer it was too. It was not just a few bits and pieces here and there. "Constant prayer was offered to God for him by the church." The church did not have political weapons. All the authorities and powers were opposed to it. But there is a power which is higher than all. And to him, the church turned. This is always the right plan. The church should never depend upon anything else. Political power and clever plans are not the way of God. They are the arm of flesh. He desires that our trust should be in him.

Let us ask ourselves. What do we know of praying constantly? Is prayer like our own breath? It ought always to be on our lips. Our hearts should never wander far from God. This is the only way to be safe. If we are close to God, we cannot be too near to sin. If we are calling on him, we will not be put to shame. Prayer is an essential thing. It is a measure of our spiritual life. When prayer wanes, our life is sure to decay. When prayer grows strong, then great things can be done. That was the early church's belief. Let us make it ours too.

## ***Expository thoughts on*** **The Acts Of The Apostles**

***Daily Bible Reading Notes***

***Week 8 (Chapter 10:34-12:5)***

**Grace Church Belper**

**<http://www.gracebelper.org.uk>**

(For previous weeks' notes, visit <http://www.gracebelper.org.uk/readingnotes.php>)

## Acts 10:34-43

*34 Then Peter opened his mouth and said: "In truth I perceive that God shows no partiality. 35 But in every nation whoever fears him, and works righteousness is accepted by him. 36 The word which God sent to the children of Israel, preaching peace through Jesus Christ - he is Lord of all - 37 that word, you know, which was proclaimed throughout all Judea, and began from Galilee after the baptism which John preached: 38 how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power, who went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him. 39 And we are witnesses of all things which he did both in the land of the Jews and in Jerusalem, whom they killed by hanging on a tree, 40 him God raised up on the third day, and showed him openly, 41 not to all the people, but to witnesses chosen before by God, even to us who ate and drank with him after he arose from the dead. 42 And he commanded us to preach to the people, and to testify that it is he who was ordained by God to be judge of the living and the dead. 43 To him all the prophets witness that, through his name, whoever believes in him will receive remission of sins.*

We have at last got there! Peter has arrived. Cornelius is ready and listening. God has brought the two of them together. The gospel is now going to be preached to a Gentile. Cornelius is not a lone Gentile in a Jewish synagogue. He is a Gentile amongst Gentiles, in his own home. What he is going to hear is the gospel for Gentiles. Here is the word of God for non-Jews. What hunger we should have as we read these words!

Let us see clearly from Peter's words that *there is only one gospel, for everyone*. As we study these words, we are struck by something very soon. We have heard Peter preach to Jews at Pentecost. We have heard him preach to the council of Israel's rulers. Now we are hearing him preaching to Gentiles. And each time, he says much the same thing. As he explains the gospel, he describes the same events. He preaches the same facts. He declares the life and death of Jesus of Nazareth. The way of salvation for Jews, was the way of salvation for Gentiles too. What Jesus had done for Israelites, he had done for Romans as well. There was one God, and one Saviour for the one human race.

No doubt there are many ways of explaining the gospel. Each hearer comes from a different place. Each occasion calls out for a different approach. Some will know of and fear the true God. Others will have been living in complete darkness. The preacher must alter his words, so that he can be understood. But there is only one gospel to be explained. There is only one plan of salvation for him to shine light upon. The approach may differ, but the gospel must remain the same. Cornelius was not told to be circumcised, or become a Jew. He was not told that he must save himself by works, or any such thing. As Jews were to be saved by the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, so was he.

We must understand that the gospel is God's word to the whole world. He has appointed a single Saviour for all mankind. It is to be preached to all, and all are to be

before. Herod had no desire to be sacked by Rome. Here was a something that made him popular, and cost him little. And for such a foolish reason as this, he came into conflict with the Son of God.

No doubt Herod did not know there was anything special about the church. There were plenty of Jewish sects. One more probably meant little to him. But this was not how God thought. He who touches the church touches the apple of God's eye (Zechariah 2:8).

We must not be surprised when the church is opposed. Its aims cut across many people's goals. We must not be shocked if they opposed it for very foolish reasons. Man's mind is spiritually very dark. He cannot see the light. He does not know what is good for him. But he can understand how to please and serve himself. Let us make sure that we do not make this mistake. Let us understand what the church is. It is the bride of Christ. It is the New Jerusalem, which has come down from God. It is the body, of which Jesus is the head. We cannot treat it lightly without making a great mistake. It is not like a club, where we can come and go as we please. It is not a supermarket, where the customer is king. It is precious to the Lord himself. It may seem nothing in the eyes of the world. But the eyes of faith cannot agree. Do we value the church? The Saviour does. For the church, he shed his precious blood. Let us be of the same mind.

Let us notice secondly that *men in even the highest positions can yet still be slaves to all kinds of ungodliness*. The great are not always good. Children especially are slow to realise this. They look at the power. They look at the greatness, and the honour, and the fame. And they see very little else. But we should not remain like that. Many of those who the world thinks of as great, are some of the worst wretches of all. They are in complete chains to the worst kinds of sins. It was so with Herod. He was a powerful man. He had united the kingdom as it had not been for two generations. He had authority to do as he pleased, even putting people to death. Squadrons of soldiers moved at his command. But what a corrupt and proud heart he had. He was only serving himself. He did not care what the church really was. He was not bothered as to whether James and Peter were good or bad men. He did not act because a thing was right or wrong. He acted as it served his own ends, and won him favour with the people he ruled. He only wanted to receive honour and power, and he did not care whether others lived or died for it. What a pathetic excuse for a man he was! He was great in name only. At heart, he was a prisoner to his own greed. He was not free to do good - he did not desire it. Whatever his lusts commanded, that he obeyed. He was more an animal than a man.

This is how it was with Herod. And it has been so with many besides. We only have to read our newspapers to see that it is true. How few of the great and famous are to be admired? How many of them have lives which are sordid and unclean? The facts are too obvious to need much said about them. Let us just make sure that we take the lesson to heart. Let us not so much seek to master other people, as to master ourselves. Let us pay more attention to the state of our hearts, than that of our bank accounts. Let us seek to grow in grace, much more than in earthly things. It is worth much more to be holy,

were a greater gift than all the money of the rich men (Luke 21:1-4). This gives a responsibility to everyone. Nobody can say that they are too poor to give. And nobody who is rich can be satisfied with giving little, even if it is much more than others. We must each give, so that it costs us. God has given us all this opportunity. We can all show how much we have appreciated the gift of his Son. No-one is disqualified by being too poor. Nobody is so rich that he can give too much. Let us all seek to give, as God has given us the chance.

Let us see finally that *responsible and godly men in the church should be entrusted with this matter*. It is a very important matter. It cannot be left to itself. It cannot be given to brothers who have not been proved. Barnabas and Saul themselves were sent on this errand. They gave the money to the leaders of the Jerusalem church. This was all very wise. Money is something which arouses a lot of emotions. It is a matter in which great integrity is needed. Great scandals are caused when churches do not handle money with care. Let us seek to be men and women who can be trusted. Let us put aside all deceit, knowing that God sees our hearts and that he is our judge, not man. Let us seek to be honest and seen to be so for the glory of his name.

## Acts 12:1-5

*1 Now about that time Herod the king stretched out his hand to harass some from the church. 2 Then he killed James the brother of John with the sword. 3 And because he saw that it pleased the Jews, he proceeded further to seize Peter also. Now it was during the days of unleavened bread. 4 So when he had arrested him, he put him in prison, and delivered him to four squads of soldiers to keep him, intending to bring him before the people after Passover. 5 Peter was therefore kept in prison, but constant prayer was offered to God for him by the church.*

This is a remarkable chapter. It is a chapter about two kings. One is king Herod, who rules as if he were a god. The other is King Jesus, who is unseen but of far greater power. King Herod "stretches out his hand" to distress Christ's church (verse 1). At the end of the chapter, King Jesus stretches out his hand to distress Herod. This is the last but one time we shall hear from Peter. The events in it are very notable. Let us listen to what the Holy Spirit has to say.

Let us see firstly that *the gospel is opposed for all kinds of reasons*. The church has already seen various persecutions. It has been opposed by the Sadducees who ruled Israel. It has been opposed by Pharisees such as Saul. Now it is opposed by the Roman ruler, Herod Agrippa I. It has now been attacked by all the major powers in the land. But they did not all move for the same reasons. Each had their own motives. Each despised Christ for a different cause. His will crossed theirs in different ways. The Sadducees did not like talk of the resurrection of the dead. They hated hearing that they had murdered God's Son. The Pharisees could not bear to hear of a crucified Christ. And Herod had political goals. He needed to keep peace in the land. He was glad to find some way to please the Jews (v3). He found that hurting the church brought him favour with them. The Jews were a troublesome lot. They had seen off many rulers

commanded to obey it. It is the same for the religious, and the same for pagans. It is the same for the old and for the young. It is the same for the wise, and the same for the simple. Jesus Christ is the Son of God, who has died for sinners. He is risen from the dead and is the judge of all. He offers life to those who bow and believe in his name. Whatever we have done, whether good or wicked, there is one way to be saved. Nobody should say that the gospel is not for them. God has not said so. He is seeking people out of every nation of the world (v35).

Let us see secondly that *the gospel is about facts of history*. It is not a religious message that just floats in the air. It is not just a set of ideas that nobody could test or prove. It is not a thing just offered for discussion, as we please. It is about real events, which happened in the real world. It is to do with real times, and real places. It is a thing which is either true or false, but not somewhere in between. It is true for all, or not true at all. It cannot be good for some, but not for others. It claims that the Son of God came in the person of Jesus. It says that he is the Lord of all. It tells us that he was promised from the start. It tells us that he was the chosen one of God. It says that he really lived, and really died. It claims that the tomb is empty, because he rose again. It claims that he, and he alone, is our final judge. It states that he offers forgiveness of sins.

With all these claims, we must ask ourselves a question. Is it true, or is it not? Jesus is not offering us good suggestions to help us with life. He is claiming to be the Son of God and only Saviour. His first preachers were witnesses, who testified that these things were so. They saw, they touched, they spoke and they heard. It was true for them, and so true for all.

The Christian faith cannot be called "one of the world religions". If it is a path to God, it is the only one. If it is not the only one, then it is not one at all. Either Jesus is alive, or he is dead. There is no middle ground. We live in a day when we are told to keep our faith private. Religion, it is said, is personal and not public. The early Christians knew nothing about that. Their faith affected their whole lives - because it was real and true. Christ was risen on Sunday, and on Monday too. Sacred and secular were not two different worlds. There was only one. We must never forget that. If Christ affects anything, he must affect everything. Do you believe that?

Let us see finally that *the Christian gospel speaks about judgment*. It always has done, and always will. This has ever been God's way. When he saves his people, he judges too. He declares his mercy, but his justice also. Jesus' resurrection is the great proof that he brings life. It is also the proof that he will bring death. Peter announced that these things were so. He said that Jesus was ordained as judge of all (v42). He pressed it upon Cornelius, and urged him to receive the "remission of sins" (v43).

The gospel can never leave us where it found us. It either leaves us nearer heaven, or closer to hell. It either draws us to Christ, or drives us away. Nobody can stand as a neutral after they have heard it. It simply will not allow them to do so. Reader, have you taken these thoughts to heart? Jesus Christ is your judge. What will his verdict be?

He will not shrug and say "I don't know". Neither can you. You must make up your mind. You are not offered a nice way to order your life. You are told how to avoid damnation for evermore. God's time of patience will come to an end. Have you found Christ, before it is too late?

## Acts 10:44-48

*44 While Peter was still speaking these words, the Holy Spirit fell upon all those who heard the word. 45 And those of the circumcision who believed were astonished, as many as came with Peter, because the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out on the Gentiles also. 46 For they heard them speak with tongues and magnify God. Then Peter answered, 47 "Can anyone forbid water, that these should not be baptised who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?" 48 And he commanded them to be baptised in the name of the Lord. Then they asked him to stay a few days.*

These words are about one of the most significant events in the history of the world. The conversion of the nations had been promised long ago. The promise of the Spirit to all flesh was very old. But now the moment had arrived. Jesus had said told his servants to disciple the whole world (Matthew 28:18-21). He had told them that they would see it happen (Acts 1:8). Now, at last, it had. Immature readers of the Bible are likely to make a mistake. Reading the book of Acts, they think everything happened in a month. They suppose that Pentecost occurred every day, and was a common thing. But it was not so. This is only the third time that the Spirit has been outpoured like this. A decade has passed. Peter did not see it every week. It was an astonishing intervention. The Spirit came gloriously at the first. He came again when the gospel advanced to Samaria. Now he came again when the first Gentiles believed. Let us read these words with care.

The first thing to see is *the great power of the Spirit of God*. Peter was speaking words. He was retelling facts about Jesus. He was telling sober truths. And as he was doing so, the Spirit came. He "fell upon all those who heard the word" (v44). He was "poured out" (v45). The Jews who were with Peter were astonished. Nobody could be in any doubt as to what God had done (v47). There were signs - especially tongues. As at Pentecost, the converts spoke great words about a magnificent God (v46).

We must always remember that the Spirit may work as and how he pleases. He is not bound by men. There can have been few things that Peter expected less. It was a great thing for him to understand that he could even eat with Gentiles! He was hardly thinking that the Spirit would be fully poured out upon them. He had no idea that they would become his complete equals in the church. And surely they imagined it even less. Cornelius had spent a lifetime separate from the Jews. He was not willing to be circumcised. He probably thought he would always be second or third class. For him to have a Jew travel to preach to him was almost unheard of. How much less could he expect to become an equal with the Jews? But the Spirit of God was not bound by these thoughts. When Christ Jesus was preached, he came with power. He chose the time, and he chose the place. The word was being preached - and now he was poured out and

included, then it must be something valuable for us. Let us pay attention to them.

These verses help us to understand the matter of *giving*. They reveal a good deal of the mind of the Lord. The first thing to see is that *God intends us to give*. It was a long way from Jerusalem to Antioch. It was not a journey to make without a good reason. And the Spirit of God does not speak any purposeless words. He inspired a prophet to reveal that a famine was about to happen. He did not reveal it so that they might sit still with the knowledge. It was not to show them secrets that others did not know. It was so that they might do something about it! Knowing that a famine was coming, they could be prepared. And being prepared meant that they would care for the churches in Judea. Those churches seem to have been particularly poor (Romans 15:26-27). And God did not plan to take away their poverty by any miracle. When famine came, they would feel it to. But God did have a way to provide for them. He let the church at Antioch know of their need. And then the church at Antioch can give.

When we give, we become like God. God is the ultimate giver. He gave even his own Son. His Son gave his own life, even to the death of the cross. Giving is an essential part of the gospel. We can testify to the truth and power of the gospel, when we give. We show that our hearts have been changed. We are becoming more like Jesus Christ.

Let us see secondly that *churches must care for churches*. The famine was going to come on "all the world" (v28). The whole Roman Empire would be affected by a great dearth. There would be enough need for whatever anyone could do. But the church in Antioch did not just give to Judea in general. They gave to the brethren who dwelt there (v29). That is, they gave to the church. This is the Lord's will. He wants us to do good to all. But in particular, he wants us to do good to the "household of faith" (Galatians 6:10). In this way, we shall be like Christ. Jesus did not come to save the whole human race. He had particular beloved ones in mind. There are those whose names were written upon his heart. For them he came; for them he bled and died; for them he rose again; for them he now prays at the Father's right hand. His special care and promises are towards believers. He is good to all. But his particular mercies are towards the household of faith. We must become more like Jesus Christ. When we stand before him at the last judgment, the question will not be whether we have loved anyone at all. Even complete unbelievers do this (Matthew 5:46). The question will be whether we have shown love to Christ. But Christ is not present in body now. We cannot pour our love out directly upon him. But his brethren are here. His saved people are with us. His word is that whatever we do to the least of them, we do to him (Matthew 25:40). Let us show the world just how much we love him!

The third principle we must see is that *each must give according to his ability*. God has not made us all equal in life. Some of us have had a lot of opportunity. Others have had less. Some may have prospered in everything they have done. Others may have had one disaster after another. These things affect our ability to give. God's rule is that each must give as he is able. This was his rule under the Old Covenant (Leviticus 27:8). It is his rule too under the New (2 Corinthians 8:12-15). God looks upon us according to what we have, not what we do not have (2 Corinthians 8:12). The widows two mites

we say "it is too much for me?" Do we see the difficulties, and so attempt nothing at all? This is not the way of Christ. This is not how the early churches were built. They grew through toil, and sweat, and effort - effort that was driven by living faith. Being full of the Spirit, Barnabas encouraged the people to carry on with the Lord (v23). He exhorted them and sought to give them strength. He knew that the Christian life is hard, and the troubles are many. He did not rest and simply wait for heaven to arrive. He encouraged the people to persevere. All these things are marks of grace, both in Antioch and in the church. God's grace is active and powerful. We must ask ourselves - what have I known of it? We do not earn our salvation by working hard. Forgiveness is God's free gift. But if we have it, then it does not leave us where we were.

Let us see finally that *Christians must not only be converted, but taught*. This was why Barnabas went up to Antioch. This is what he did when he was there. This was why he went on to Tarsus to try to find Saul. This is what Saul and Barnabas did with the church in Antioch for a whole year. The end is not in sight when we have first come to Christ. It is only the beginning. It is definitely a wonderful thing when a person is saved. An old life has been finished with. Maybe prayers and struggles and witnessing has been going on for years, before a person comes to the Lord. But when they have come to the Lord, they have only just begun. They are spiritual babies (1 Peter 2:2). They need to be fed, so that they might grow. They must become mature, and bear fruit for Christ. To do this, they need to be taught. There are many who seem to start the Christian race, but never finish it. The word is choked by thorns and weeds. They have no root, and so do not persevere (Matthew 13:3-9). Only time will tell of what kind a convert really is. But whatever they are, if they are not taught they cannot grow. Let us be careful that we do not grow tired of the word of God. Let us not start hungering for other things. Let us not think that because we have some religion and attend church that that is all we need. We must make sure that we are always learning from the word. We must receive teaching continually. Our minds are so slow, and our flesh is so weak. We easily forget, and we easily let things go. And so, we need teaching all the time. This is how we will keep our souls alive. We must receive the word of God, and obey it. Let us ask ourselves - are we doing so?

## Acts 11:27-30

*27 And in these days prophets came from Jerusalem to Antioch. 28 Then one of them, named Agabus, stood up and showed by the Spirit that there was going to be a great famine throughout all the world, which also happened in the days of Claudius Caesar. 29 Then the disciples, each according to his ability, determined to send relief to the brethren dwelling in Judea. 30 This they also did, and sent it to the leaders by the hands of Barnabas and Saul.*

This incident is mentioned in very few words. But the important thing is that it is mentioned at all. Acts is not a record of everything that happened in the early church. It does not show us what daily life was like. It is a record of the most important events. It shows us the things of real note. That is what makes these words so valuable. Surely there were many significant things that happened over these years. If this has been

given to them.

The great thing which we need is the power of the Spirit of God. I do not mean the signs which he brought at the first. I mean the reality that it pointed to. The Spirit of God, advancing the gospel of Christ. The word moving people to repent and believe. Great things being said about Jesus Christ, because he has opened peoples' eyes. God being glorified, because he has converted their souls. We must never despair as if he cannot work. If he pleased, he could completely astonish us all. The gospel's advance is in his hands. We must pray for him to bless.

Let us secondly see the key lesson of this great event. *Jews and Gentiles became one church*. This was what astonished the Jews so much. Maybe they could accept that Gentiles could believe. Surely they knew that the Christ had come for the whole world. But now they saw that Cornelius was completely equal with them. Had the Spirit been given to the Jews? So he had to these Romans too. Had the gift been poured out to a very great extent at Pentecost? Now it was in Cornelius' house too. Had the people in Jerusalem spoken with tongues about the wonderful works of God (2:11)? Now all who heard the word in that room did precisely the same. The lesson was clear. No mistake could be made. As converted Jews were in the church, so were the Gentiles too. They were not in on lesser terms. They would not take the second place. Nothing had been withheld from them. In Christ there would be neither Jew nor Greek (Galatians 3:28).

All Christians are equal in Christ. This is something that we must remember all the time. It is true that different Christians have different gifts. Some can do more, and some less. Some have authority in the church, and others none. But this does not change the essential fact. Whoever believes in Jesus Christ, is a child of God. They will receive every promise that the gospel holds out. They have the same access, to the same Father, by the same Spirit. They will share in the same eternal life. All things belong to them. Christ loves them, and gave himself for them, just the same as any who believe. As these things are true, we must act as if it is so. The church should not be full of cliques. Each person should look to every other one. We must show the world that what unites us is Christ. There are plenty of groups united by their age, or their call in life, or because they easily get along. The church must show that it is united by Christ. The little old lady and the believing infant boy share only a single faith. Who in the church do you stay away from? Who do you say is not your kind of person? Who do you think is at a different level to you? All such thinking is ungodly, and must go. Christ has only one church.

Let us notice finally that *those who believe must be promptly baptised*. This was the way of the early church. This was what the apostles themselves taught and carried out (v48). When Peter saw the proof of true faith, he did not delay. He might have had every reason to. To baptise an uncircumcised Gentile was a completely new thing. Some might say it should be done very slowly, and with great care. The church should be consulted; there should be delay and not haste. But in fact it was impossible for Peter to think that way. The Holy Spirit had clearly spoken. These Gentiles were part of the church. And those who are part of the church, must be baptised. They had received the

baptism of the Spirit by being converted (1 Cor. 12:13). Therefore they must receive the baptism of water too.

Baptism should mark the start of the Christian life. It should not be delayed. It should not be put off for months or for years. Many people have made a mistake here. Many ideas have been spread which were unknown to the first church. Baptism marks out the new disciple of Jesus Christ. If we believe, then we must be baptised. Are not Peter's words very interesting? He did not ask the Gentiles to be baptised. He did not request it of them. He commanded that it must be so! (v48). This is the Lord's will. Baptism is not his suggestion. It is his revealed purpose and will. Let those who have not obeyed it, take this to heart.

## Acts 11:1-18

*1 Now the apostles and brethren who were in Judea heard that the Gentiles had also received the word of God. 2 And when Peter came up to Jerusalem, those of the circumcision contended with him, 3 saying, "You went in to uncircumcised men and ate with them!" 4 But Peter explained it to them in order from the beginning, saying: 5 "I was in the city of Joppa praying; and in a trance I saw a vision, an object descending like a great sheet, let down from heaven by four corners; and it came to me. 6 When I observed it intently and considered, I saw four-footed animals of the earth, wild beasts, creeping things, and birds of the air. 7 And I heard a voice saying to me, 'Rise, Peter; kill and eat.' 8 But I said, 'Not so, Lord! For nothing common or unclean has at any time entered my mouth.' 9 But the voice answered me again from heaven, 'What God has cleansed you must not call common.' 10 Now this was done three times, and all were drawn up again into heaven. 11 At that very moment, three men stood before the house where I was, having been sent to me from Caesarea. 12 Then the Spirit told me to go with them, doubting nothing. Moreover these six brethren accompanied me, and we entered the man's house. 13 And he told us how he had seen an angel standing in his house, who said to him, 'Send men to Joppa, and call for Simon whose surname is Peter, 14 who will tell you words by which you and all your household will be saved.' 15 And as I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell upon them, as upon us at the beginning. 16 Then I remembered the word of the Lord, how He said, 'John indeed baptised with water, but you shall be baptised with the Holy Spirit.' 17 If therefore God gave them the same gift as He gave us when we believed on the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could withstand God?" 18 When they heard these things they became silent; and they glorified God, saying, "Then God has also granted to the Gentiles repentance to life."*

These verses contain a lot that we have already read. But God's book does not waste words. This was a most important event. No mistakes could be afforded. The whole church must know just what God had done. They must know that Peter had not done it. It had come from the Lord. Luke says this again and again. We find it hard to understand what a huge event this was.

One thing to learn from these words is that *churches should help and encourage one another*. There is really one one Christian church. It is that great body for which Christ died. It is the family of all the saints. It contains every person who truly trusts in Jesus Christ. The church has a unity which already exists. It does not need to be made by shows and displays. It is already there. True believers have one faith, one baptism and one Lord. They have received one Spirit, and serve one God. If this is all true, then true churches cannot do anything else but be deeply interested in one another. They have far too much in common to do anything else! Their ties are deeper than parent and child; even than husband and wife. Marriage will end when the Lord returns; Christian bonds will never cease.

It is because of all this, that we see the church at Jerusalem taking the steps it did. Antioch was a considerable distance away. But when they heard that Christ had a church there, they sent Barnabas out. No church can be an island. We are not independent of one another. It is true that each church ought to take care of its own affairs. But this does not mean that they must refuse all help. Barnabas did not go to lord it over Antioch. He went as a brother and as a friend. He did not go to make them submit to Jerusalem. He went to build them up. The church's unity is not that of an organisation. There is no hierarchy, or headquarters, or leader who rules over all. But there is the unity of family, brotherhood, concern and mutual help. This is something we find hard to get our heads around! We are used to businesses, and managers and an overall boss. But the church is not like that. Help must come from a loving heart. Everything must be in the spirit of brothers and sisters. This shows our real unity in the Lord. We must strive to make it so.

Let us see secondly in Luke's words *some of the marks of true spiritual life*. This is a subject which deeply concerns us all. It is something which many churches today say very little about. People are easily given the impression that they belong to Christ. If they come to a few services, and say and do the right things, everybody thinks that they are a Christian. But it is not so. There is a real thing called conversion. If we have not had it, we are not saved. It is a thing which makes a great difference. Its results are far-reaching, and will show themselves over time. Barnabas and Antioch show us many of these things. Let us take note of them.

Barnabas in Antioch saw "the grace of God" (v22). This made him glad, and brought him encouragement. God's grace itself is not a substance that can be seen. But its effects always are. He saw people who had turned from darkness to life. He saw people who now hated sin, and sincerely loved Christ. He saw people who were leaving behind sinful ways, and pursuing what was good. He saw love, and prayer, and hunger for the word. He saw the marks of the grace of God. It is remarked that "he was a good man". He was full of faith (v24). He had great confidence that Christ would build his church. He was bold, and took action when needs were. He was ready to journey all the way into Antioch in Syria. When he saw the needs there, he set off again to go and find Saul. He did not know where Saul was. He went a great distance with few leads to follow. But he believed it was the Lord's will, and so he set out. We may ask ourselves - what have we done for the Lord? Do we have faith that he can do great things? Or do

a "Pope". The early church knew of no such thing. If there was ever a "mother church", it was in Jerusalem, not in Rome. But even that first apostolic church did not remain central for ever. God's work moved on, and others were then used. This has always been God's way. He will show us that he is not tied down. We must learn that he depends upon no man or any human thing. The idea that the true church is centred in Rome is not taught anywhere in the New Testament. It is a pure invention. It has brought great harm to many children of God. It has caused great offence to an unconverted world. We should not feel intimidated by it. It is contrary to the word of God.

Let us notice finally what was the hallmark of the faith of these early Christians. *Their Christianity was all about Jesus Christ.* We are told that they were first called "Christians" in Antioch. It does not say that they chose this name for themselves. The believers had always been called "disciples", or "followers of the way" (Acts 1:15, 6:1, 9:19, 9:22, 22:4). But now outsiders gave them a name. What was most striking about the church? What were they always talking about? What was right at the heart of all that they did? Outsiders cannot be easily fooled! They can see what we are about. And these outsiders named them "Christians" - the ones of Christ. He was the Saviour they confessed. He was the one they loved. He was the one they preached, and in his name they prayed. Everything in life, they related to the Lord Jesus.

We must ask ourselves how our Christianity compares to theirs. Is it the real thing, or is it something else? What would our friends and neighbours call us if they had to choose a name? Would they speak of the church? Would they say that we had a Sunday religion? Or would they say that our passion was Jesus, the Christ? Unconverted people cannot understand spiritual things. But some things should be so plain that they cannot be missed. Real Christianity is all about Christ. If we are looking for truth, or grace, or life, we must look to him.

## Acts 11:22-26

*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. 23 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. 24 For he was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and of faith. And a great many people were added to the Lord. 25 Then Barnabas departed to Tarsus to seek Saul. 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.*

These words are telling us how Antioch became a prominent church. It is from Antioch that Paul's great missions will all be launched. It is Antioch that will make clear what Jews and Gentiles are one in Christ. Antioch will now be very closely involved in God's plan. Let us study these verses well.

Let us learn from these verses that *the church grows with difficulty*. This lesson stands out very clearly. Peter was an apostle of Christ. He had spent three years with the Lord. He had been taught by the Son of God himself. He was the leader of the twelve. He had seen the risen Christ. He had spoken in tongues. He had been greatly used of God. Thousands had been converted when he had preached (Acts 2:41, Acts 4:4). And yet here we find that some "contended with him" (v2). They thought that he was wrong. They had heard that he had eaten with Gentiles - and they condemned him for it (v3). But we must not be too hard on them! Peter had felt the same way very recently. He himself had only just begun to understand. It was a great surprise for him too. So he explained just what had been done.

As long as men are men, we must expect growth to bring pain. All do not move at the same pace. Some minds are very quick, and others are slow. Some can see further ahead, others not so far. When God is at work, there is change and movement. Things do not remain the same. We must learn to be patient with one another. We must not be too quick to condemn. We must look at the main things. Is the gospel of Jesus Christ being preached? Are people being turned from their sins to faith in him? Is there real work of the Spirit in conviction of sin? Are eyes being opened to the glory of the Lord? The Jews at Jerusalem should have asked these things. Then they would not have contended wrongly! We ought to ask these questions too. Is sin being preached down? Is Christ being preached up? It will be good if these things are so!

Let us see secondly that *God has made the main things clear*. God knows that we can be slow. And his truth is very deep. In eternity, we will not discover it all. Who has a mind like the Lord's? It is too high for us. His wisdom cannot be found out. His ways are beyond our feeble brains. But the Lord does not require us to perform such mighty things. He has made the main things obvious for us. It was so with Peter. He brought Cornelius into the church in a way so that nobody could mistake. When Peter told the tale, "they became silent" (v18). There was no other response - they "glorified God"; it was clear what God had done (v18). God had brought the meeting about. God had sent his angels. God spoke by the Spirit. The Spirit himself had fallen upon them. It was just as at the beginning of the church. It was what the Lord Jesus had spoken (v16). There was no way to deny it. The Lord's will was clear. He had brought the Gentiles into the church, just as the Jews.

There are many things in the Bible which seem very dark. They are difficult, and we cannot work them out. But we must never lose sight of the main things. God has made these very plain. The Bible is full of clear and bright light. We are created, and live in God's world. We owe everything we have to him. God has a law, which is perfect and right. His ten commandments reveal the standards we ought to keep. We have all sinned, and come short of the requirements of God. We are guilty, and deserve to be punished. But there is a Saviour, who is God's Son. He has suffered the penalty for sin. He has died, and risen again. He offers to us life, and we must simply believe. These things are very clear. They are said time and again. Nobody can miss them, unless he is deliberately perverse. A child can understand them. We are sinners, and Jesus Christ is able and willing to save us. We must only trust him.

How grateful we should be that God has spoken to us in such simple words! He has made it as easy as possible for us to be saved. What great kindness and love this is. And how wicked it must be to turn down this. Let us not make a mistake. If we are not saved, it is no fault of God's. He does not require us to understand great mysteries. He simply tells us to repent. If we are damned at last, the blame will all be ours.

Let us notice finally that *repentance is God's gift*. This is what Peter plainly said (v18). Repentance had been granted by God. This is not the first time. Peter said it too in Acts 5:31. There, God gave repentance to Israel. Now he gives it to the Gentiles. Paul says the same, in 2 Timothy 2:25. The Bible's witness is always the same. Repentance is a free gift from God. It is certainly true that *we* must repent. Nobody can repent in our place. Repentance involves our hearts, our wills and our minds. We do not simply sit still and wait. But there is a reason why one repents, and another does not. If we trace it back, it goes beyond human things. It comes back to the decrees of God. Left to ourselves, nobody would repent. The human heart is too stubborn, and too hard. Sin is too attractive to us. We are too blind and dead to the things of God. But - wonderful news - God can overcome even this. He gives the gift of a new heart, and a new will. He opens our eyes, and gives us new life. He shows us our sin, and draws us to Christ. He grants repentance, so that we can be saved. Let us praise our sovereign God. The reason why any are saved is because of him. And the whole of salvation is a work of grace. We do not contribute some, and him the rest. He gets the credit for it all. Faith is a gift (Ephesians 2:8), and repentance is too. All is from God. Glory to his name!

## Acts 11:19-26

*19 Now those who were scattered after the persecution that arose over Stephen travelled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus, and Antioch, preaching the word to no one but to Jews only. 20 But some of them were men from Cyprus and Cyrene, who, when they had come to Antioch, spoke to the Hellenists, preaching the Lord Jesus. 21 And the hand of the Lord was with them, and a great number believed and turned to the Lord. 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. 23 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. 24 For he was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and of faith. And a great many people were added to the Lord. 25 Then Barnabas departed to Tarsus to seek Saul. 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.*

The words here are few in number, but very important. We are introduced to Antioch for the first time. This place will be most important in the spread of the gospel to the world. In these verses, Barnabas comes back to centre stage. This will be a very significant development. The history of the world in the last 2000 years would have been very different, if not for these things. Let us read these words with special interest.

Let us notice firstly that *God is well able to bring good out of evil*. The "persecution that arose over Stephen" was a very evil thing. A very godly man had been brutally killed. Christians were being harmed in great numbers. They were losing their homes, losing their liberty, and even losing their lives. Murderous men like Saul had chased them over hundreds of miles. But out of this, God brought great good. As the Christians were scattered, they took the word with them. They were cut off from the church in Jerusalem. But they formed new churches in the places they went to. They went to Phoenicia to the north west. They travelled out to Cyprus in the Mediterranean Sea. They went up to Antioch in Syria in the north. Many Jews heard the word of God. And in Antioch, Gentiles heard it too.

How did this all happen? Because "the hand of the Lord was with them" (v21). They took the word, and they took it with power. God had not abandoned them. Because they were persecuted, it did not mean they were forgotten by God. God had his hand fully involved. The persecution was wicked, and all the blame belonged to sinful men. But whilst they intended it for evil, God meant it for good (Genesis 50:20). We should not despair when evil seems to be winning! God may yet completely turn the tables. The gospel has always advanced through suffering. Its very basis is the sufferings of Christ. God's power is seen when man's weakness is most clear (2 Corinthians 12:9). We must never think that God has been defeated. He is infinitely wise. He knows all things. Nothing escapes his all-seeing eye. Nothing can happen except what agrees with his purposes in Christ. A Christian is never abandoned by God. Our feelings may go up and down, and then down and up. But God's mind always remains the same. If he loves us in Christ, then we are loved forever. If he once accepted us because of his Son, he accepts us always. We may feel his presence and care more at one time than at others. But that presence and care themselves never change. God's work is often silent, but it is always real. We must not become gloomy when things seem to be going the wrong way. God is well in control. When we seem to be divided and scattered, great things may be on their way. Let us just make sure that we trust him. Let us make sure that we are not grumbling or complaining, but holding on. If we wait upon the Lord, we shall renew our strength (Isaiah 40:31). Our labour in the Lord shall not be in vain (1 Corinthians 15:58).

Let us remark secondly that *God is not tied to any one place, time or person*. That is a clear message from the chapters we are now in. Until now it has all been in Jerusalem. Everything has been done through the Jews. Peter has been the man who has preached with great success. But now things are moving on. We will hear of Peter again, but not very much. We will be in Jerusalem again, but not to stay. Now it will all be Antioch. Paul and Barnabas will be the men greatly used by God. The new advances for the gospel will not come in Jerusalem, but in Asia minor. The meaning of this is clear. The church's success does not depend on clever methods, or people, or belonging to the right group. God is far above all these things. We must look to him.

These verses certainly destroy one idea. That idea is that the church was meant to have a permanent centre in Rome. That idea is that the church would have one leader, called