



SCRIPTURE SHARED
UNSTOPPABLE
THE BOOK OF ACTS

Week 5: Apostles

Week 5, Day 1 – The Church in Antioch

Acts 11:19-30

19 Now those who were scattered because of the persecution that took place over Stephen traveled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus, and Antioch, and they spoke the word to no one except Jews. 20 But among them were some men of Cyprus and Cyrene who, on coming to Antioch, spoke to the Hellenists also, proclaiming the Lord Jesus. 21 The hand of the Lord was with them, and a great number became believers and turned to the Lord. 22 News of this came to the ears of the church in Jerusalem, and they sent Barnabas to Antioch. 23 When he came and saw the grace of God, he rejoiced, and he exhorted them all to remain faithful to the Lord with steadfast devotion, 24 for he was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and of faith. And a great many people were brought to the Lord. 25 Then Barnabas went to Tarsus to look for Saul, 26 and when he had found him he brought him to Antioch. So it was that for an entire year they met with the church and taught a great many people, and it was in Antioch that the disciples were first called “Christians.”

27 At that time prophets came down from Jerusalem to Antioch. 28 One of them named Agabus stood up and predicted by the Spirit that there would be a severe famine over all the world, and this took place during the reign of Claudius. 29 The disciples determined that, according to their ability, each would send relief to the brothers and sisters living in Judea; 30 this they did, sending it to the elders by Barnabas and Saul.

Understanding the Passage:

There are a number of important “firsts” in this passage. Let’s take them one by one.

We see the first major growth of the church outside Judea and Samaria. Remember Acts 1:8, when Jesus said, “You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” The growth of the church in Antioch is a huge step toward the fulfillment of Jesus’ prophecy. Now the church has expanded beyond its home base in Jerusalem and the region of Judea, gone farther north than even Samaria, and has taken root in the big city of Antioch. The church is steadily marching to the ends of the earth.

Antioch is the first multiethnic church. The “Hellenists” are Greek-speaking Jews who are far removed in the Jewish family tree from the Hebrew- and Aramaic-speaking Jews of Jerusalem, even though they share a common faith and ancestry. Not only do they speak a different language, but these two groups are as culturally different as citizens of different countries are today. Yet in Antioch, the Spirit brings the Jewish family back together under the reign of Christ. Yes, they’re different linguistically, culturally, and racially, but they’re one in Christ. The church in Antioch is the first church that Acts remembers that achieves true unity without uniformity.

Thus, the church in Antioch is the first church where disciples of Jesus are called “Christians.” Until this point, members of the Jesus movement were described as Jews, followers of the Way, disciples, or simply “brothers.” The term Christian means “little Christ.” The church members of Antioch wanted to imitate Christ so deeply, the goal was to be a miniature version of Christ himself. Essential to the imitation of Christ in Antioch was unity in the church, overcoming the barriers that would divide us, respecting differences, and praising God as one diverse people.

Antioch is the first church that Barnabas and Paul serve together. Paul had been in Tarsus, his hometown, preaching the gospel and presumably pastoring a church there. But Barnabas recruits Paul to Antioch because Barnabas needs a strong associate pastor. Barnabas takes Paul under his wing and becomes Paul’s mentor. The two will be inseparable for a few years, pastoring and growing the Antioch church together, then going on to plant new churches together.

Finally, we see the first glimpse of the decline of the Jerusalem church. There’s a famine, and the poor Jewish Christians of Jerusalem fall on hard times. The church in Antioch takes up a collection and supports the Jerusalem church monetarily. Paul will keep this up when he plants other churches around the Mediterranean, sending money to the poor in Jerusalem and thereby redistributing the finances of the church from the “haves” to the “have nots.” As one part of the body of Christ strengthens, as in Antioch, the Spirit spreads out that strength to those parts of the body that are suffering, as in Jerusalem.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection:

1. How does our church achieve unity without uniformity? How do we fall short?
2. Are you living like a “little Christ”? Where could you stand to align your life closer to Christ?
3. Who are your mentors? Who are your mentees?

Week 5, Day 2 – Peter Imprisoned

Acts 12:1-5

¹ About that time King Herod laid violent hands upon some who belonged to the church. ² He had James, the brother of John, killed with the sword. ³ After he saw that it pleased the Jews, he proceeded to arrest Peter also. (This was during the Festival of Unleavened Bread.) ⁴ When he had seized him, he put him in prison and handed him over to four squads of soldiers to guard him, intending to bring him out to the people after the Passover. ⁵ While Peter was kept in prison, the church prayed fervently to God for him.

Understanding the Passage:

There are four people named Herod in the New Testament. This one is Herod Agrippa I, one of the grandsons of Herod the Great. Herod Agrippa ruled over all of Jerusalem and Judea as a puppet king of the Roman Emperor.

James, the brother of John, is probably James’ son of Zebedee, one of the original twelve disciples. He is the second martyr of the church, after Stephen. His loss was a tragedy. The entire church of Jesus Christ is only a few thousand people strong, and in Jerusalem the church was small enough that everyone knew one another. It was a tight-knit family. Imagine losing a leader of your movement, one of the few who had walked the earth with the movement’s founder, Jesus. Even more, imagine losing a father or grandfather figure, a revered elder in your life. A library of wisdom is gone.

But like with Stephen, persecution against the church, as horrifying as it was, became rocket fuel for the Spirit. It’s only because Stephen is killed that some members of the church flee Jerusalem and

settle in places like Antioch, where the gospel spreads like a weed. The Spirit takes the pain of persecution, suffering, and loss and refines it to become fuel for the growth of the church. So, remembering Stephen, we should expect the Spirit to do a similar thing in the wake of the martyrdom of James and the imprisonment of Peter.

Why was Peter thrown in jail? We're not told exactly why, but we can safely assume that Peter was causing a good kind of mess in Jerusalem. He preaches Jesus is Lord, not the emperor. He preaches Christ is King, not Herod. Peter would say he's just preaching the gospel; the powers that be would say he's breaking the law. Proclamation of the gospel is always resistance against whatever isn't the gospel, and sometimes the anti-gospel forces of the world fight back.

We also see the church taking an interest in prison ministry. One of their own is incarcerated, and what do they do? They remember him. They pray for him. They don't forget him while he does his time. Wherever the church gets involved with prisons and the lives of the incarcerated, they honor a 2000-year-old tradition going back to Peter. If Peter can be a beneficiary of prison ministry, why not the millions incarcerated today?

Questions for Discussion and Reflection:

1. Who are the James's of your life, the venerated libraries of wisdom who have passed away or are nearing death?
2. Why would persecution lead to church growth?
3. Where do you see this sentence happening in real-time today: "Proclamation of the gospel is always resistance against whatever isn't the gospel, and sometimes the anti-gospel forces of the world fight back."

Week 5, Day 3 – Peter Delivered from Prison

Acts 12:6-17

⁶ The very night before Herod was going to bring him out, Peter, bound with two chains, was sleeping between two soldiers, while guards in front of the door were keeping watch over the prison. ⁷ Suddenly an angel of the Lord appeared, and a light shone in the cell. He tapped Peter on the side and woke him, saying, "Get up quickly." And the chains fell off his wrists. ⁸ The angel said to him, "Fasten your belt and put on your sandals." He did so. Then he said to him, "Wrap your cloak around you and follow me." ⁹ Peter went out and followed him; he did not realize that what was happening with the angel's help was real; he thought he was seeing a vision. ¹⁰ After they had passed the first and the second guard, they came before the iron gate leading into the city. It opened for them of its own accord, and they went outside and walked along a lane, when suddenly the angel left him. ¹¹ Then Peter came to himself and said, "Now I am sure that the Lord has sent his angel and rescued me from the hands of Herod and from all that the Jewish people were expecting."

¹² As soon as he realized this, he went to the house of Mary, the mother of John whose other name was Mark, where many had gathered and were praying. ¹³ When he knocked at the outer gate, a maid named Rhoda came to answer. ¹⁴ On recognizing Peter's voice, she was so overjoyed that, instead of opening the gate, she ran in and announced that Peter was standing at the gate. ¹⁵ They said to her, "You are out of your mind!" But she insisted that it was so. They said, "It is his angel." ¹⁶ Meanwhile Peter continued knocking, and when they opened the gate they saw him and were amazed. ¹⁷ He motioned to them with his hand to be silent and described for them how the Lord had brought him out of the prison. And he added, "Tell this to James and to the brothers and sisters." Then he left and went to another place.

Understanding the Passage:

You've heard this story before, but elsewhere.

Peter is arrested during the Festival of Unleavened Bread. Who else was arrested during the Festival of Unleavened Bread? Jesus.

Herod intends to bring Peter before the Jews of Jerusalem and make them decide if he lives or dies. Sound familiar? That's right. Jesus.

Peter was chained between two soldiers. Jesus was crucified between two criminals.

There were guards posted outside of Peter's cell. There were guards posted outside of Jesus' tomb.

An angel of the Lord shows up and breaks Peter out of jail. An angel of the Lord showed up to roll away the stone and break Jesus out of death.

Chains fell off Jesus' wrists. Jesus' burial clothes fell off his body, dirty laundry for Peter to find.

Peter showed himself in the flesh to the church so they could see he was really and truly alive, and they didn't believe it at first. Jesus showed himself in the flesh to the disciples so they could see he was really and truly alive, and they didn't believe it at first.

A woman was the first to see Peter alive and she runs to tell the others. A woman was the first to see Jesus alive and she runs to tell the others.

Peter said, "Tell this (that I'm alive) to James and to the brothers and sisters." An angel said, "But go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him, just as he told you." (Mark 16:7)

What can we learn here? First, the church is to be faithful and follow Jesus even when it means going to a tomb. The tomb could be a prison cell, a hospital room, a highway overpass – wherever sin and death keep people in bondage. Second, the church is constantly in motion between *going out* in mission and *coming in* to the community. We go into the world to give, serve, sacrifice, and witness, and we come in to rejoice at what God has done. Third, the church should expect God to provide when putting our lives on the line for God's mission. Being ministers of the gospel isn't for the faint of heart; there are sacrifices involved; but the same God who started the mission is the same God who will see it through. We need not worry about ourselves, only that we remain faithful to the work the Spirit has given us, as risky as it is.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection:

1. How are you following the pattern of Jesus' ministry – being faithful to God to the point of loving sacrifice?
2. Where do you feel more comfortable – in the *going out* group or the *coming in* group? Are you a missionary in the field or the host at home? Both are essential.
3. What is the risky thing that God is calling you to do? What keeps you from doing it?

Week 5, Day 4 – Barnabas and Paul

Acts 13:1-12

¹ Now in the church at Antioch there were prophets and teachers: Barnabas, Simeon who was called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen a childhood friend of Herod the ruler, and Saul. ² While they were worshiping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, “Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.” ³ Then after fasting and praying they laid their hands on them and sent them off.

⁴ So, being sent out by the Holy Spirit, they went down to Seleucia, and from there they sailed to Cyprus. ⁵ When they arrived at Salamis, they proclaimed the word of God in the Jewish synagogues. And they had John also to assist them. ⁶ When they had gone through the whole island as far as Paphos, they met a certain magician, a Jewish false prophet, named Bar-Jesus. ⁷ He was with the proconsul, Sergius Paulus, an intelligent man who summoned Barnabas and Saul and wanted to hear the word of God. ⁸ But the magician Elymas (for that is the translation of his name) opposed them and tried to turn the proconsul away from the faith. ⁹ But Saul, also known as Paul, filled with the Holy Spirit, looked intently at him¹⁰ and said, “You son of the devil, you enemy of all righteousness, full of all deceit and villainy, will you not stop making crooked the straight paths of the Lord?¹¹ And now listen—the hand of the Lord is against you, and you will be blind for a while, unable to see the sun.” Immediately mist and darkness came over him, and he fumbled about for someone to lead him by the hand.¹² When the proconsul saw what had happened, he believed, for he was astonished at the teaching about the Lord.

Understanding the Passage:

Here is the beginning of Barnabas and Paul’s missionary journey together. We typically think Paul was always the guy in charge, but no: Barnabas was the mission trip leader, and Paul was his assistant director. Barnabas was the master; Paul was the student.

There were several “prophets and teachers” in the Antioch church. They’re a diverse bunch. Barnabas is from Cyprus. Paul is from Tarsus. Simeon is from Niger in north Africa. Lucius is from Cyrene, also in north Africa. Manaen was a member of the aristocracy, being a longtime friend of King Herod; he has friends in high places. These leaders of the church are as diverse as the church itself.

The Holy Spirit says, “Set apart for me.” That’s what the Spirit does: set apart people for the work to which God calls them. The Spirit has work for every member of the body of Christ to do. We’re never “set-above” or “set-below” others. But the Spirit does set us apart for unique work. Discernment is the spiritual discipline of figuring out what that work is. But thankfully, discernment isn’t a solo job. The Antioch *community* discerned together. They heard the Spirit’s voice together and heard what God was doing in Barnabas and Paul, even if they couldn’t hear it in themselves. Discernment is a personal thing but never a private thing, it’s always a community thing, and it’s an essential thing for every believer so that we live out what the Spirit is setting us apart to do.

Barnabas and Paul depart for a long journey to proclaim the gospel and plant churches, and where do they go first? Home. To Barnabas’s home in Cyprus. The first mission field God calls us to is home.

Their first convert is the proconsul, like a mayor, of the town of Paphos. The proconsul wants to hear what Barnabas and Paul have to say, but two “magicians” try to block them. The word for “magician” is *magos*, where we get the word Magi. It’s the same word used for the Magi who visited baby Jesus. In the nativity story, the Magi are the good guys; they’re seekers who read the stars (the Magi in the nativity are probably astrologers) and see clear evidence that a Messiah has been born. But here in Paphos, these “magicians” are the bad guys, opposed to the gospel. What makes these

“Maji” in Acts different from the Magi in Matthew? The clearest difference is *desire*. One group simply doesn’t want to hear information that would change their worldview, that there is a Messiah who has come to save the world; the other group, though, wants to hear new information, they’re curious, and they’re willing to bend their lives to the good news even it means they were wrong about what they were sure of before.

Paul does to the magicians outwardly what is true for them inwardly. He blinds them. They’re blind on the inside, too. It’s a willing blindness. They willingly close their eyes to the good news that conflicts with what they’ve always known. May we be like the proconsul and the Magi who are willingly open to what God has to say, especially when it causes friction within us, and as far unlike the willingly blind magicians as we can be.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection:

1. What are you “set apart” to do? If you don’t know, who are the friends who could tell you?
2. Think about your home. What is your ministry at home? What are you called to do at home?
3. How can you be willingly open to what God has to say to you, rather than willingly blind?

Week 5, Day 5 – Encouragement of Believers

Acts 14:21-28

²¹ After they had proclaimed the good news to that city and had made many disciples, they returned to Lystra, then on to Iconium and Antioch. ²² There they strengthened the souls of the disciples and encouraged them to continue in the faith, saying, “It is through many persecutions that we must enter the kingdom of God.”²³ And after they had appointed elders for them in each church, with prayer and fasting they entrusted them to the Lord in whom they had come to believe.

²⁴ Then they passed through Pisidia and came to Pamphylia. ²⁵ When they had spoken the word in Perga, they went down to Attalia. ²⁶ From there they sailed back to Antioch, where they had been commended to the grace of God for the work that they had completed.²⁷ When they arrived, they called the church together and related all that God had done with them and how he had opened a door of faith for the gentiles. ²⁸ And they stayed there with the disciples for some time.

Understanding the Passage:

Barnabas and Saul make it as far west as modern-day Turkey. They don’t enter the continent of Europe; Paul gets to Europe later. Instead, they turn around and repeat their trip in reverse. Here’s what they do:

- They visit the churches they had planted. We hear “visit,” and we think, “Well that’s not real ministry. Where’s the preaching? Where’s the church planting? Where’s the *action*?” But ask a homebound person how much a visit means to them. Or ask the son or daughter whose parent is in the hospital how much a hospital visit means to them, the children, that someone would take the time to check on their mom or dad. Visiting people *is* ministry, some of the most important ministry we do.
- They encouraged their friends. You might think that if Barnabas and Paul were visiting these churches again, they might do whatever they could to grow these churches. Wouldn’t they pick up where they left off and get back to adding numbers to the church? But there’s a time for expansion, and a time for regrouping, and this is a time for regrouping.
- They appointed elders in each church, meaning, Barnabas and Paul delegated church leadership to trusted, set-apart leaders who could keep the Kingdom movement going. A mark of great leadership is how well you can raise up new leaders and how healthy a place is when you’ve left it. Barnabas and Paul are thinking onward to when they *aren’t* in these churches. What can they do to make the churches better without them?

- They celebrate what God has done. Barnabas and Paul have success to report. They preached the gospel, and the gospel connected with people. The church has expanded farther to the ends of the earth. Now it's time to celebrate! Sometimes, there are no lessons to teach or sermons to preach. We just need to party.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection:

1. Who do you need to visit today? Who do you need to love with your simple presence?
2. Who do you need to encourage today?
3. What do you need to celebrate today? And with whom will you celebrate?

Video Discussion Questions:

1. The martyrdoms of Stephen and James lead to church growth. Why would persecution lead to church growth?
2. Think about the *going out* and *coming home* rhythms in Acts. The apostles go out to preach, evangelize, heal, and grow the church. The members of the church who remain in Jerusalem receive the apostles, set the dinner table, and keep up the prayer and worship life of the church. How do you see that rhythm lived out today?
3. The first place Paul and Barnabas go is to Barnabas' home. How can we see our homes as the first mission field?
4. Paul and Barnabas meet magicians who reject the Gospel. They don't *want* to receive new information about how the universe works. How can we reach people with the gospel who are willingly blind to new information about how the world works?
5. Why is it so important that Paul and Barnabas return to all the churches they planted?
6. David talked about how God tries to change us for the better, and so our willingness to change isn't contrary to the Christian life. How has the Holy Spirit moved you to change?
7. What do you see in others that makes you hungry for Jesus? What part of your life makes other people hungry for Jesus?

Prayer requests and other notes.