

Text: Acts 11.19-30
St Stephen's

Grace In Sight!

We are moving through Acts...tracking the expansion of the Gospel that has now burst outside the confines of the Jewish people and begun spreading to Gentiles.

The response was tremendous.

And the hand of the Lord was with them, and a great number that believed turned to the Lord. News of this came to the ears of the church in Jerusalem, and they sent Barnabas to Antioch.

Acts 11:21-22 (RSV)

They sent Barnabas up to check it out. Do you remember who **Barnabas** was? We've seen him a couple of times already in Acts...

- When he was converted about 5 years earlier in Ch 4, he sold a field he owned and brought the money to the Apostles to give to the poor and to support the work of the gospel... (Acts 4.36-37)
- A few years later when Paul was converted at first everyone else was afraid of him. But not Barnabas. Barnabas believed what God was doing in Paul, and stood up for him... (Acts 9.27)

So the Apostles sent Barnabas, Luke summed up his assessment...

...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...

Acts 11:23 (RSV)

Isn't that an interesting phrase? *'He saw the grace of God'*.

Sometimes we are so aware that we worship an invisible God and follow a Jesus who has risen beyond our sight – that **we don't expect to see** what we believe. But Barnabas could 'see' the grace of God. That says something important, and I would like to think about it with you.

You remember **what grace is...** it is God's "**One-Way Love**" His "gift love", unearned, undeserved. The Gospels are full of grace stories...

- Remember when a woman was caught looking for the wrong kind of love with the wrong kind of man and she was dragged out and thrown at Jesus' feet, surrounded by angry men with stones in their hands, and 10 minutes later they have dropped their stones and walked away and he says to her, "Neither do I condemn you. Go and sin no more."
- Remember when Judas was about to betray Jesus, and Jesus knew it, and he stooped to wash Judas' feet.?
- Remember when everyone deserted him, and he went on to give his life for every one of them – and for every one of us? That's grace.

The Gospels are full of grace stories... about sick people who are healed and debts that are forgiven and outsiders who become insiders and a God who sends his blessings on the good and the bad alike.

Like the Gospels, **in Acts you see grace in action.** When you **read carefully through Acts**, you notice that Luke uses **different phrases** to describe how grace works. At one point Luke says 'great grace **came upon** everyone'. That can happen. People are urged to **continue in grace** and people are **commended to God's grace**. This happens in **Paul's last visit with a group of elders** from the church at Ephesus. It is a **tearful farewell**, and everyone knows they will never see the Apostle again. Here are Paul's last words to them...

And now I commend you to God and to the word of his grace, which is able to build you up and to give you the inheritance among all those who are sanctified.

Acts 20:32 (RSV)

With all the difficulties and dangers he knew they would face, he simply commended them to "*God and to the word of his grace*". He said that the word of grace could '**build them up**' and **bring them home**. That's what the one way love of Jesus can do.

Here's the point. God's grace is real. It is **a living force. It can be seen.** It can be touched and felt and experienced. It is substantial. It can 'come upon' you and 'fill' you and shape you and 'build' you. It is an active force in **human history** and in **your history.**

Let's go back to our passage for today. **What was it that could be seen** in Antioch? What was it that **made Barnabas glad?**

Now those who were scattered because of the persecution that arose over Stephen traveled as far as Phoenicia and Cyprus and Antioch, speaking the word to none except Jews. But there were some of them, men of Cyprus and Cyrene, who on coming to Antioch spoke to the Greeks also, preaching the Lord Jesus.

Acts 11:19-20 (RSV)

- **Barnabas could see a 'Grace Team'**

This is arguably one of the most important moments in the history of the world, when the gospel went from Israel to the Gentile lands, and we **don't even know the names** of most of the people God used to open the door!

"Those who had been scattered"... "Some of them..."

Isn't that great? They were just plain people. No super Apostles, no known leaders anywhere to be seen. In fact, this moment was not planned by the leaders, voted on by the leaders, or conceived by the leaders. It was just plain folks, like you and me. Get it? Ordinary people doing extraordinary things! It was a grace team! That made Barnabas glad.

- **Barnabas could see a 'Grace Leap'**

What I mean by that is that they shared beyond their own race and religion and culture. **Antioch** was the third largest city of the Roman empire. About 500,000 people lived there at this time. Let me tell you a bit about the culture of Antioch... Wm **Barclay** writes that...

"[Antioch] was famous for the worship of Daphne whose temple stood five miles out of the town amidst its laurel groves. The legend was that Daphne was a mortal maid with whom Apollo fell in love. He pursued her and for her safety Daphne was changed into a laurel bush. The priestesses of the Temple of Daphne were sacred prostitutes and nightly in the laurel groves the pursuit was re-enacted by the worshippers and the priestesses. "The morals of Daphne" was a phrase that all the world knew for loose living."

There is nothing that any good Jew would have **detested** more than the combination of **idolatry and sexual immorality**. Any good Jew would have dusted off his sandals and written those people off. But not these Jews. The phrase is, *'they spoke to the Greeks also... preaching the Lord Jesus'* That takes grace. That takes one way love.

As Christians went out into the gentile lands they would find that combination (idolatry and sexual immorality) **all over the world**, all throughout this country. The grace of Jesus is **always leaping** towards people caught in sexual brokenness – religious people and non-religious people. Remember what Jesus did with the **Samaritan woman** at the well who had been married five times – caught in **idolatry and adultery** – how he led her to living water! **Grace leaps** into lives like that. Barnabas could see it and it made him glad.

- **Barnabas could see Grace Results**

And the hand of the Lord was with them, and a great number that believed turned to the Lord. News of this came to the ears of the church in Jerusalem, and they sent Barnabas to Antioch.

Acts 11:21-22 (RSV)

Luke uses the word 'great' no less than 3 times in these paragraphs to describe the results. It was great grace that lead to a great

number that turned to the Lord.. He is saying that this was undeniable evidence of God at work.

One more piece of evidence that Barnabas was probably blind to...

- **Barnabas was a Grace Leader**

He was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and faith...

Acts 11.24

Barclay: “they sent the man with the biggest heart in the church”. The one who couldn’t give enough... the one who believed in Paul when no one believed in Paul. Look what he did next...

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

Acts 11.25-26

Saul had been in his hometown for some 7 or 8 years since he had been hustled out of Jerusalem when his life was threatened after his conversion back in chapter nine. We don’t know all of what Paul was doing there. There is some indication that he had been preaching some, and some indication that perhaps his family had disinherited him. It must have felt like he had been benched. Put on the sideline. He was in God’s waiting room, and that can be a place where you feel like you have been forgotten. But he had not been forgotten – it turned out he was being prepared.

It was Barnabas who called him out, to come to Antioch to help. Barnabas, who believed in Paul when no one else did. This is what grace leaders do. When others see reasons to say ‘no’, they see the power of grace, and they say, ‘yes’. They take risks. They venture out. This is how the Apostle Paul got his start in ministry. Because a grace leader gave him a chance.

There is more to say. Antioch would become the church that pioneered international relief efforts back to the poor believers in Jerusalem. This is the church that launched Paul on his missionary journeys.

This is the church where you could see grace. See it and receive it and live it.

We can be like that. You can be like that. Because grace is like that!