



Central Peninsula Church

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What Do You See When You See the Grace of God?

SERIES: *Acts: The Rest of the Story*

We talk a lot about what a unique place we live in—the San Francisco Peninsula. And what a unique place this is to do ministry. There is no place quite like this in the world—diversity, cost of living, pace of life, economic opportunity.

Today I want to introduce you to the Testament equivalent of the SF Peninsula. It's a place called Antioch. We've seen that the book of Acts tells the story of how the Christian movement spread like wildfire. In chapter 8 we saw how the gospel spread from Jerusalem to Samaria and built a bridge over the chasm of hatred between Jews and Samaritans. In chapter 10 we saw how it spread to the totally non-Jewish people of Ceasarea and built a bridge over the alienation between Christian Jews and non-Christian gentiles. Today we come to a part of the story that describes another decisive step in the spread of the gospel. It's found in Acts 11:19-30. In these verses we track the Christian movement all the way north along the coast of the Mediterranean Sea to Antioch, the chief city of Syria.

Like San Francisco, Antioch was an important and influential city. When Luke wrote Acts it was considered the third most important city in the empire behind Rome and Alexandria. It was cosmopolitan with a tremendous mix of people. There were Arabs and Jews living there, along with many Greeks and Romans. It was also a commercial center. Being on the Orontes River made it possible to maintain trade with other Mediterranean cities. The wealth of the east flowed through Antioch on the way to Rome. With such a mix of people and so much wealth, it was a very sophisticated place. It also had a reputation for being morally corrupt. Outside the city there was a grove of trees called The Grove of Apollo, which was really like an outdoor house of prostitution. Antioch was so well known for its debauchery that when a Roman senator was trying to describe how Rome had been corrupted, he said, "The Orontes has flowed into the Tiber."

But the gospel came to Antioch just like it has come to the Bay Area. And I want you to read what happened when it got there. Turn with me to Acts 11.

"So then those who were scattered because of

the persecution that occurred in connection with Stephen made their way to Phoenicia and Cyprus and Antioch, speaking the word to no one except to Jews alone. But there were some of them, men of Cyprus and Cyrene, who came to Antioch and began speaking to the Greeks also, preaching the Lord Jesus. And the hand of the Lord was with them, and a large number who believed turned to the Lord. The news about them reached the ears of the church at Jerusalem, and they sent Barnabas off to Antioch. Then when he arrived and witnessed the grace of God, he rejoiced and began to encourage them all with resolute heart to remain true to the Lord; for he was a good man, and full of the Holy Spirit and of faith. And considerable numbers were brought to the Lord. And he left for Tarsus to look for Saul; and when he had found him, he brought him to Antioch. And for an entire year they met with the church and taught considerable numbers; and the disciples were first called Christians in Antioch. Now at this time some prophets came down from Jerusalem to Antioch. One of them named Agabus stood up and began to indicate by the Spirit that there would certainly be a great famine all over the world. And this took place in the reign of Claudius. And in the proportion that any of the disciples had means, each of them determined to send a contribution for the relief of the brethren living in Judea. And this they did, sending it in charge of Barnabas and Saul to the elders" (Acts 11:19-30).

The sentence I want to focus on this morning from verse 23: **"When he [Barnabas] arrived and witnessed the grace of God, he rejoiced..."** I want you to underline those words: "He witnessed the grace of God and he rejoiced." What I would love to see happen every Sunday and in every meeting we have is for us to be able to say: "I witnessed (saw) the grace of God, and I rejoiced." Notice that the grace of God was visible. And it should become as visible today as it did then in Antioch. So I want to ask, when the grace of God is visible in a

place like this, what do you see? What will we see here on the SF Peninsula when the grace of God becomes visible? Whatever it is, it's something God does. It's a gift. That's why it's called the grace of God. It isn't something humans manufacture. But when you see it, when you witness it, what do you see, and what is your reaction? Do you rejoice?

I. What do you see when you see the grace of God?

A. You see people coming to Christ: It started with people being thrust out of their comfort zone in Jerusalem as a result of persecution. These ordinary believers made their way north into Phoenicia, which is modern day Lebanon. They went west to the island of Cyprus and then all the way north into Syrian Antioch. Luke says as they went they were **“preaching the Lord Jesus”** and many were coming to faith. I love how Luke puts this. He says, **“the hand of the Lord was with them and a large number who believed turned to the Lord.”** Don't miss the fact that the large number who believed did so because of the hand of the Lord. People don't turn to the Lord because of a slick presentation; they do so because the Lord is at work in their hearts as they hear the gospel. It's not the hand of the preacher but the hand of the Lord. That continued after Barnabas arrived. Luke says, **“and considerable numbers were brought to the Lord.”** I was reading an article about what God is doing in Viet Nam. It's pretty amazing. In one province called Dac Lac there were 12,000 believers in 1975. In 1999 there were 87,000. Today there are an estimated 120,000 believers. When you see that, when you see people coming to Christ like that, you are witnessing the grace of God.

B. You see people from a variety backgrounds: The second thing has to do with the kinds of people you'll see turning to the Lord. At first Luke says they were speaking the word to no one except Jews alone. But then in v.20 it says they **“began speaking to the Greeks also.”** There were both Jews and Greeks who were turning to the Lord and so the church at Antioch was diverse from the very start. I have no doubt that one of the things that convinced Barnabas that the grace of God was at work was the fact that these two groups of people were all of a sudden being of one mind and one spirit. Those who would previously have nothing to do with each other were now like family.

One of the biggest dividing lines we have the world today is between Sunni and Shiite Moslems. The rift goes back centuries. It's not just a

religious thing; it's a cultural thing. What if you went to the Middle East today and visited a church and found out it consisted of a mixture of Sunnis and Shiites? You would say, “Well, that must be the grace of God at work.” Right here in this church we have those of Jewish descent and those of Arab descent. We even have Giants fans and Dodger fans! When you see that, you're seeing the grace of God!

C. You see people who are teachable The third thing you'll see is people who are teachable. We see it in how they're teachable to Barnabas. Here is this great move of God taking place. People are being transformed by the gospel. But, when the church of Jerusalem hears about all these gentiles coming to Christ, they're not sure what to make of it and they want to check it out. This isn't the first time they had done this. Remember when the Samaritans started coming to Christ through Philip in chapter 8, the church in Jerusalem sent Peter and John to check it out. In the same way, here the church in Jerusalem sends Barnabas. Those at Antioch could have just had the attitude that said, “Why do we need someone from Jerusalem to come up here and put their stamp of approval on this? It's obvious God is in the middle of this. We don't need them.” I know Christians like that. I know churches like that. They don't want to be accountable to anyone. But these people were teachable to Barnabas.

As a matter of fact, so many wanted to be taught that Barnabas needed help. So he goes up to Tarsus to look for his old friend Saul. Remember him? The last time we saw him he was fleeing from Jerusalem because there was a plot to kill him. He's now been in Tarsus for close to ten years. He probably felt totally forgotten by the powers that be. But now Barnabas takes the time and goes to Tarsus and finds Saul and brings him back and together they teach the new believers in Antioch for an entire year. There is an interesting play on words here: in v.24 it says **“considerable numbers were brought to the Lord”** and then in v.26 it says they met with the church for a whole year and **“taught considerable numbers.”** The idea is that all those people who came to Christ are now being taught and disciplined.

It's not enough for people to just become Christians. There is a need for those people to be taught and nurtured in the faith. You see that in what Barnabas said to them in v.23. It says he **“encouraged them with resolute heart to remain true to the Lord.”** In essence he says, “You've made a good start, but you'll need some stamina if you're going to make it over the long haul. You need to be ready not for a sprint but for a marathon. There will be many hills and twists and turns and trials along the way, but you need to stay true to the Lord.”

When new believers are hungry for the word because they want to stay true to the Lord you know you're seeing the grace of God at work.

D. You see people who remind us of Christ: The fourth thing you'll see is people that remind you of Jesus. Verse 26 says **"the disciples were first called Christians in Antioch."** This wasn't what they called themselves but this was what others called them. It was likely a label of some derision. And one of the things it indicates is that they were being seen more and more as not just a part of Judaism but as something separate and distinct. This was a problem because the Roman empire recognized Judaism as a legal religion but it didn't recognize this new separate entity of Christians.

So this term "Christian" became sort of a label for believers. These folks had called themselves various things over the years. They called themselves "saints," "believers," "people of the Way," "brothers and sisters." But now they're called "Christian." Do you know what that means? It means "Christ-one." It's an acknowledgment that these people were trying to be like Jesus; they were followers of Jesus. It might have started as a title of derision but I have a feeling that the early believers took it as a compliment and it stuck. Wouldn't you love for someone to say that about you, "He reminds me of that Jesus guy."

H.A. Ironside, a great preacher from a generation ago, says that when he was traveling in China years ago he was often introduced as "Yasu-yan." At first he didn't know what the word meant, but he asked about it and learned that "Yasu" was the Cantonese word for Jesus and "yan" was the word for "man." So he was being introduced as "Jesus-man," which was fine by him.

You see, that's the essence of being a Christian. It's not just about trusting in Jesus as your Savior, but it's about becoming like Jesus; becoming his apprentice in life. John says, **"By this we know that we are in Him: the one who says he abides in Him ought himself to walk in the same manner as He walked"** (1Jn 2:5b-6). When you see people walking as he walked, you're seeing the grace of God at work.

E. You see people who are giving: And how did Jesus walk? He walked in love. This leads us into the last thing you'll see when you see the grace of God. A prophet named Agabus comes to Antioch and predicts that a famine is coming that will spread throughout the Roman world. Notice that Agabus didn't say what they should do about it; he just told them what was going to happen. But then these believers asked the question, "Well, shouldn't we do something to help them? I mean, we're all Christ-ones. And he taught us not to store up treasure on earth. He taught that everything belongs to him. He taught us to give.

So let's take up an offering and send whatever money we collect to Jerusalem to help them." And that's what they did. They all gave in proportion to their means. They didn't all give the same amount, they each gave what they could. And one of the practical effects of this gift was that it was an expression of unity between Jews and gentiles. They could have just said, "Well, they're Jews and we're Gentiles, why should we help them?" But this shows they're seeing themselves as one church, not as Jews or gentiles but as "Christ-ones." When you see people giving like that, you're seeing the grace of God.

These are the things that are visible when grace of God is present. You see people who are coming to Christ, a variety of people who are now becoming one. You see people who are teachable to the word of God. You see people who are becoming like Jesus. And you see people who give. The question is, what do you do when you see that? How do you respond? What kind of reaction does that invoke in you?

II. How do you respond when you see the grace of God?

A. We should rejoice: Go back to the verse we started with. Verse 23 says that **"when Barnabas arrived and witnessed the grace of God, he rejoiced..."** We might think, "Well of course, what else could he have done?" But he could have resented what he saw. This wasn't something that came about as a result of HIS ministry. So many of us rejoice when we see God blessing our own lives or our own church or our own family, but how many of us rejoice when we see the grace of God at work in somewhere else? He could have grudgingly said, "Well, I guess Gentiles have a right to hear, too. If God is going to include them, I guess I must also." But instead he rejoiced. Or he could have immediately tried to control what was going on: "Well, I had better take charge here or this is going to get out of control." But instead he rejoiced.

I think this is part of why he got the nickname Son of Encouragement. The most encouraging people I know are those who rejoice with me in what God is doing. The joy they feel is a form of encouragement because the joy says more powerfully than words, "I genuinely believe and see that God is at work in you in ways that I find exhilarating." My wife is like that. She has the gift of encouragement. I love to tell her stuff that God is doing in my life or the church's life or one of your lives. She gets excited about that and that encourages me.

Let me ask you, when you see the grace of God at work, do you rejoice? It doesn't matter if it's in this church or another church. It doesn't matter if it's in your small group or another. It doesn't matter if it's in your family or another. Do you rejoice wherever you see it?

B. The kind of person who rejoices: What kind of person rejoices when they see the grace of God at work? The answer is found in what Luke says about Barnabas in v.24, **"...for he was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and of faith."** Do you see the connection? The reason why Barnabas rejoiced in what he saw was he was this kind of person.

He was a good man. We say that of people today, but what does it really mean? I can't help but think of how Jesus used this word in Luke 18. The rich young man approached Jesus and said to him, **"Good teacher what must I do to inherit eternal life?"** Jesus answered, **"Why do you call me good? No one is good except God alone."** That's a strange statement, but Jesus is exposing this man's shallow perception of goodness. He didn't really believe that Jesus was God. But he threw that word around as if people could actually be good enough to earn eternal life. In and of themselves, no one is good because we're tainted by sin. How then can Luke say that Barnabas was a good man? How do we become good?

The answer comes in the next part of the verse. It says that Barnabas was good because he was **"full of the Holy Spirit and faith."** He had God's Spirit within him. That's true of every believer. But not every believer is always full of the Spirit. Paul says in Ephesians, **"Do not be drunk with wine...but be filled with the Spirit."** When you're drunk with wine you're being controlled by that substance. When you're filled with the Spirit you're being controlled by the Spirit. When we're full of the Spirit, we'll bear the fruit of the Spirit. Do you remember what those are according to Galatians 6? Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, *goodness*, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control. Did you notice the sixth item in that list? Goodness. Goodness is the fruit of the Spirit. Goodness isn't to be morally perfect, but to be the kind of person we see Barnabas is; a selfless person; an encouraging person; a giving person. That's goodness.

But to be full of the Spirit and his fruit come as a result of being full of the next thing—faith. Faith

is trusting in, abiding in, relying on all that God is. We don't become good people by trying to act good; we become good people by believing God's promises; by trusting him to do his work in us and through us. Faith isn't about feelings. A person of faith simply believes God's word and expects him to act upon it. Many people think that they're filled with faith only when they have a sense of excitement within them. If they don't have that feeling then they say, "Well, I'm sorry, I don't have any faith." But they don't understand what faith is. Faith isn't a feeling. Faith is a recognition that God has promised something, and, since he is God, to expect him to do it, and therefore to act on that basis. When Barnabas, a man of faith, came to Antioch, he came expecting to see God at work, expecting God to give him the wisdom to handle whatever situation developed. He didn't come to attempt to control this new work of the Spirit; he came down to see what God had been doing. And because he knew it was the grace of God at work, he could rejoice.

CONCLUSION

The exciting thing about this passage is that we can expect God to work here in the same way he did there. The grace of God is at work today through the Holy Spirit. He's like a great river, cutting a fresh channel, going wherever he wishes. We can't control him. Sometimes we act like Christian flood control experts. We don't like the way the Holy Spirit moves. We like to dig a channel, line it with concrete, and say, "Come, O River of God. We've dug the channel. Now flow through it now according to our desire." But God doesn't work that way. He makes his own channels. We build levies and dams and attempt to direct the Spirit's flow. But, as Jesus said, the Spirit is like the wind; he blows wherever he wishes. It's refreshing to recognize that. The Holy Spirit has cut new channels repeatedly throughout twenty centuries of church history, and we can either try to control the flow or we can be like Barnabas and say, "Yes! That's the grace of God. I see it here and I rejoice in it."

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