

Sunday, October 26, 2025 | Martyrs

Week 11 | Acts 11:19-26 | “Believers, aka Christians, Pt. 1”

**READ:** Acts 11:19-26 (ESV)

<sup>19</sup> 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 no one **except Jews**. <sup>20</sup> But there were some of them, men of Cyprus and Cyrene, who on coming to Antioch spoke to the **Hellenists** also, preaching **the Lord** Jesus. <sup>21</sup> And the hand of **the Lord** was with them, and **a great number** who believed turned to **the Lord**.

<sup>22</sup> The report of this came to the ears of the church in Jerusalem, and they sent Barnabas to Antioch. <sup>23</sup> When 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, <sup>24</sup> for he was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and of faith. And **a great many people** were added to **the Lord**. <sup>25</sup> So Barnabas went to Tarsus to look for Saul, <sup>26</sup> and when he had found him, he brought him to Antioch. For **a whole year** they met with the church and taught **a great many people**. And in Antioch the disciples were first called **Christians**.

There is a long history of religious groups being labeled by those outside of that religion: quakers was a nickname given because they “trembled” during religious meetings; Methodists was a pejorative term used to describe John Wesley’s followers because of their “methodical” approach to religious practice; Puritans was a name given by outsiders criticizing their desire to “purify” the Church of England; Baptists became known as such because of their rejection of infant baptism and insistence that professing believers be fully immersed when baptized.

In today’s passage, so many people will become believers that nonbelievers living in Antioch will coin a term: *Christian*. Little did they know that, even after 2,000 years, this label will still be utilized today to describe those who are characterized by their attachment to Jesus Christ. Whenever followers of Jesus live out their faith, people take note. Just as city on a hill cannot be hidden (cf. Matt. 5:14), disciples cannot hide.

In this passage, **two things** characterize the church:

i. **Vs. 19-26 – The Church is distinguishable.**

**Vs. 19-20** – Luke mentions that the Jewish believers who fled during the first great persecution of the church, kicked off by Stephen’s martyrdom, went as far as four places:

**Phoenicia** – This was a coastal region along the Mediterranean Sea, known for its wood (cedars of Lebanon) and dyes.<sup>1</sup>

**Cyprus** – This was an island in the middle of the Mediterranean Sea, known for its copper mines and for being the birthplace of Barnabas (cf. Ac. 4:36).<sup>2</sup>

**Antioch** – This is not to be confused with the Antioch of Pisidian (Ac. 13:14). As it was the capital of Syria, it is better known by Antioch of Syria. This was the third largest city in the ancient world with Egypt being the second and Rome being the first.<sup>3</sup>

**Cyrene** – This was a coastal city of Northern Africa situated west of Egypt and it was often paired with the Island Crete, hence why it comes side-by-side with Cyprus.<sup>4</sup>

Given these regions, it is remarkable how widespread the gospel was at this time. However, though Jewish believers had touched many parts of the civilized world, for the most part, Luke says they were only interacting with “Jews.” But he mentions a notable exception. Those of “Cyprus and Cyrene” came to “Antioch” and presented the gospel to “Hellenists.” Admittedly, up to this point, this term has only referred to Jews who had embraced, in some way, Greek culture, be it Greek customs or the Greek language (cf. Ac. 6:1; 9:29). However, two details make it apparent that when Luke says “Hellenists” he means Greek gentiles.

- (1) Firstly, given the use of the term “but” Luke is clearly making a comparison between those in verse 19 and those in vs. 20. One on the one hand, you have those who evangelized “no one except Jews,” and, on the other, it stands to reason that those in vs. 20 were those who didn’t confine themselves to the Jews only.
- (2) Secondly, the Jerusalem church sent Barnabas to confirm that this group had indeed received the Gospel (cf. vs. 22). The same protocol was followed when the Samaritans received the Gospel (cf. 8:14). And, as we just read in chapters 10 and the beginning of 11, Peter, along with six other Jews, were sent to Caesarea where they just so happened to confirm that the Gospel had gone to the Gentiles. No such confirmation has been needed

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<sup>1</sup> Walter A. Elwell and Barry J. Beitzel, “[Phoenicia, Phoenician](#),” in *Baker Encyclopedia of the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1988), 1688, “Thus they had good ship timber and an important source of revenue in a wood-starved region of the world. Offshore grew some of the finest dye-producing murex (sea snails) of the Mediterranean, making possible quality textiles and dye stuffs.”

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 563.

<sup>3</sup> Peterson, David G., *The Acts of the Apostles*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing, 2009), 350.

<sup>4</sup> Chad Brand et al., eds., “[Cyrene](#),” in *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary* (Nashville, TN: Holman Bible Publishers, 2003), 377.

when it came to Jews receiving the gospel, regardless of whether they were Hebrews in every sense of the world, or Jews who had been Hellenized.

The message to the Gentiles in Antioch was simple. The Jewish Christians came “preaching the Lord Jesus.” Interestingly, *kyrios* (“Lord”) is used four times in four verses. The Son of God is Lord as much for the Jew as the Gentiles. As he himself said in Matt. 28:18, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.”

**Vs. 21** – Notice Luke doesn’t commend the Jewish believer’s boldness nor their ingenuity in going to non-Jewish people with the Gospel. Instead, he says, “And the hand of the Lord was with them, and a great number who believed turned to the Lord.” It was by “the hand of the Lord” that so many “turned to the Lord.” Luke said something similar after Pentecost: “And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved” (Ac 2:47). The credit goes to the Lord! In Matt. 16:18, Jesus declared, “I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.” The one primarily responsible for the growth of his house is the Lord. This principle is as old as the Book of Psalms. King Solomon, the man responsible for constructing the first Temple, wrote, “Unless the LORD builds the house, those who build it labor in vain. Unless the LORD watches over the city, the watchman stays awake in vain. It is in vain that you rise up early and go late to rest, eating the bread of anxious toil; for he gives to his beloved sleep” (Psa. 127:1-2).

**Vs. 22** – When the Samaritans received the Gospel, the church sent a delegation to confirm that the Church had indeed reached Samaria (cf. Ac. 8:14). Likewise, when “the church in Jerusalem” heard that the Gospel had reached the Gentiles in Antioch, they wanted to confirm that the church had indeed reached one of the most important metropolitan cities in the Roman Empire. But, instead of sending Peter and John, as before, the church “sent Barnabas to Antioch.”

As the crow flies, there’s about 300 miles between Jerusalem and Antioch. We’re not sure if Barnabas traveled by foot or by boat, or some combination of the two. Whatever the mode of travel, this journey would’ve taken at least a month, perhaps even longer.

If you’ll recall, “Barnabas” was a nickname he received from the apostles, and it meant the “son of encouragement” (Ac. 4:36). He likely got this nickname because shortly after becoming a Christian he sold a piece of property and gave the sum to the church to help with the needs of the poor (cf. Ac. 4:37). Interestingly, Barnabas was from the Island of Cyprus (cf. Ac. 4:36) which was about 100mi off the coast of Antioch. As such, he would’ve been familiar with the region around Antioch. Perhaps this is why he was sent and not someone else. Barnabas was also the

one who spoke on Saul's behalf, helping him reconcile with the very Christians he had persecuted (cf. Ac. 9:27). Outside the apostles themselves, you'd be hard-pressed to find a more well-respected and gifted officer in the church than Barnabas. **You didn't have to be an apostle to mightily used of God.**

**Vs. 23** – When Barnabas came Antioch, he “**saw the grace of God.**” It was evident the moment he stepped into the city and interacted with those new Gentile believers that God's unmerited favor had done a miraculous work. Witnessing such a thing made Barnabas “**glad.**” John says, “**I have no greater joy than to hear that my children are walking in the truth**” (3Jn. 4). Nothing makes a preacher of the Gospel happier than when he see people following the Lord.

Barnabas took this golden opportunity to encourage these new Gentile believers. Luke says, “**He exhorted them all to remain faithful to the Lord with steadfast purpose.**” The Greek word translated as “**steadfast**” is *kardias* and its often translated as “heart” (cf. Ac. 14:17; 1 Thess. 2:4; Rom. 8:27). The Greek word translated as “**purpose**” is *prothesis* and it refers to something planned in advance.<sup>5</sup> Essentially, Barnabas wanted these Gentile believer to resolve, with all their hearts, to remain “**faithful to the Lord**” no matter what. He wanted them to be committed to Jesus Christ, devoting themselves to become a loyal disciples.

**Vs. 24** – Luke says Barnabas was “**a good man.**” Notice, the characteristics which designate “a good man” is twofold:

Someone who is “**full of the Holy Spirit.**” In Acts 4, Peter is described as being “filled with the Holy Spirit (cf. 4:8). The first Christian martyr, Stephen, was also described as being “**full of the Holy Spirit**” (Ac. 6:3, 5; 7:55). Paul tells Christians living in Ephesus, “**Do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery, but be filled with the Spirit**” (Eph. 5:18). Barnabas wasn't guided by spirits, but God the Spirit. He was spirit-led, doing whatever the Holy Spirit desired.

Someone who is full “**of faith.**” Again, Stephen was also characterized as a man “**full of faith**” (6:5). These men are the kind of Christians who believed anything is possible with God (cf. Matt. 19: 26). They had the sort of faith that could move mountains (cf. Matt. 17:0). They were exemplary figures in the Church, demonstrating that a life guided by faith is far better than a life guided by anything else.

Barnabas wasn't known for his charisma, eloquence, intelligence, or talents, though he might've had all those things. This man was known for being a conduit of the Holy Spirit and for being a paragon of the faith. One's character is far important to God than the talents one might bring in service to God. In the words of Charles Spurgeon, “A good character is the best

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<sup>5</sup> Louw-Nida (1996), 1:357.

tombstone. Those who loved you and were helped by you will remember you when forget-me-nots have withered. Carve your name on hearts, not on marble.”

Luke says, “[And a great many people were added to the Lord.](#)” Now that Gentiles were welcomed into the church, Christianity was growing at an exponential rate. But notice that Luke doesn’t say they were added to the Church, but “[added to the Lord.](#)” [These believers didn’t become proselytes of Peter or some other apostles. They were grafted into the True Vine which is Jesus Christ \(cf. Ac. 5:14\).](#) Though the believers likely had to meet in various locations, they were all a part of Christ. They all shared in a union with the Son of God. None had a privileged position. They all shared the same status and connection to the Lord.

**Vs. 25-26** – Luke says, “[Barnabas went to Tarsus to look for Saul.](#)” As the crow flies, Tarsus was northwest of Antioch about 85mi. Given that both cities were on the water, its likely Barnabas traveled by boat as that would’ve been fastest, safest, and most direct route.

Over a decade has passed since Paul was in Jerusalem in Acts 9: Luke says nothing about this grand reunion and instead says Barnabas brought Paul “[to Antioch.](#)” [From this point forward, Barnabas and Paul will be partners for many years.](#) Over the next six years, they will travel to [twelve different cities](#), preaching the gospel: Antioch of Syria, Seleucia, Salamis and Paphos on the Island of Cyprus, Asia Minor, Antioch of Pisidia, Iconium, Lystra, Derbe, Perga, Attalia, and, of course, Jerusalem.

Just because the Gentiles in Antioch had become Christians, didn’t mean they were *mature* Christians. Such a thing doesn’t happen overnight. So, Luke tells us Paul and Barnabas, “[met with the church](#)” “[for a whole year they,](#)” during which, they “[taught a great many people.](#)” This is the *third time* in this passage that Luke mentions the multitudes who had become believers (vs. 21, 24). Needless to say, Christianity had made a huge impact in Antioch. In fact, there were so many that they became a distinct group within the broader culture of Antioch. Hence, Luke says, “[And in Antioch the disciples were first called Christians.](#)”

The term, literally means, “Christ-partisan,” or someone characterized by their attachment to Christ.<sup>6</sup> Notice that they weren’t called “Jesus follower.” Given that the name “Jesus” also known as “Joshua” was a common name at this time, this makes sense. Interestingly, the term “Christian” was a title given to them by others and not one they gave themselves.<sup>7</sup> And, as such, it is almost certain that this was a derogatory term—e.g., Puritans, Methodist, Baptists,

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<sup>6</sup> DBAG, 1090.

<sup>7</sup> Vickers, Brian J., “Acts,” *ESV Expositor Commentary*, Vol. IX, John-Acts (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2019), 444.

and so on.<sup>8</sup> This moniker will catch on and spread. This is evident by the fact that about twenty years later, it will show up again in Caesarea, a town 250 miles south of Antioch, on the lips of King Agrippa in Acts 26. And, by that time, it was used by believers themselves (cf. 1 Pet. 4:16).<sup>9</sup>

### So, what's the takeaway?

An **ordinary** life lived for Christ leaves an **extraordinary** legacy.

#### READ: Hebrews 11:4 (ESV)

By faith Abel offered to God a more acceptable sacrifice than Cain, through which he was commended as righteous, God commending him by accepting his gifts. And through his faith, though he died, he still speaks.

#### READ: Hebrews 11:8 (ESV)

By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to a place that he was to receive as an inheritance. And he went out, not knowing where he was going.

#### READ: Hebrews 11:11 (ESV)

By faith Sarah herself received power to conceive, even when she was past the age, since she considered him faithful who had promised.

#### READ: Hebrews 11:24 (ESV)

By faith Moses, when he was grown up, refused to be called the son of Pharaoh's daughter, choosing rather to be mistreated with the people of God than to enjoy the fleeting pleasures of sin.

#### READ: Hebrews 11:31 (ESV)

By faith Rahab the prostitute did not perish with those who were disobedient, because she had given a friendly welcome to the spies.

The world's history books are filled with important people doing important things. The Bible is full of ordinary people serving an extraordinary God.

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<sup>8</sup> DeYoung, Kevin, "Don't Lose the Term 'Christian,'" July 12, 2013, *The Gospel Coalition*, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/kevin-deyoung/do-not-lose-this-term-christian/>, [accessed, October 24, 2025].

<sup>9</sup> 1 Peter was written around 60AD

## **Video Description:**

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**Sermon Manuscript:** <https://bit.ly/4hprAmA>

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