

Back to the Future (Acts 11:19-30)

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- [0 : 0 0] So Acts chapter 11, 19 to 30. 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. During this time, some prophets came down from Jerusalem to Antioch.
- One of them, named Agabus, stood up and through the spirits predicted that a severe famine would spread over the entire Roman world. This happened during the reign of Claudius.
- The disciples, as each one was able, decided to provide help for the brothers and sisters living in Judea. This they did, sending their gift to their elders by Barnabas and Saul.
- Thank you, Cynthia. It was a lovely reading. Good afternoon, church. How are we doing?
- [1 : 4 8] Great, great. Just doing really well in silence. Yeah, just really excited to be able to share with you all again today. Shall we pray before we get started?
- Heavenly Father, Lord, God, we thank you for being the head of this church, Lord. We thank you for a long line of examples of people, of churches that you've shown us in the Bible, Lord, in our history.
- Would you speak to us today as we go into your word, Lord? Help us to receive the words with humility, Lord, and to really understand how you want us as a church, as PCBC, to be your disciples, Lord, a church that follows you.
- So, yeah, God, may the words that are spoken today, Lord, be from you. We give this time to your hands. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen. Cool.
- In the 1980s, a series of films predicted what the future would look like. A teenage wannabe musician and his crazy, wacky scientist friend traveled 30 years into the future to October 2015, seven years ago.
- [3 : 1 0] The movie got a lot of things right. They predicted mobile payments, fingerprint readers, video calling. Some things they got wrong. I'm pretty disappointed we don't have hoverboards now or self-tying shoelaces, even though my shoes don't have shoelaces on them.
- Back to the future, this movie was a massive success. People love to imagine what the future could look like and how different times could change. Have you ever wondered what you would do if you could look back into the past or forward into the future?
- What would you see? What would you learn? As we finish off Acts chapter 11, as Cynthia just read, I believe that looking back to the first church, the first Christians, we are given a glimpse into what PCBC, our church, this church could be.
- So, yeah, today we're going to talk about going back but looking forward into PCBC's future. So, just to recap where we are at the moment in our story, our passage reintroduces us to the believers from Acts chapter 8.

After Stephen had been martyred, buried, and mourned, the disciples and the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria. Much like at the end of Avengers Infinity War, our heroes were scattered, broken up.

[4 : 35] They were probably scared, they probably felt defeated. And yet, we see not all hope is lost. We're told that those who traveled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus, and Antioch, they spread the word among Jews.

Not only that, men from Cyprus and Cyrene, they went to this place, Antioch, and began to speak to Greeks, the Gentiles also, telling them the good news about Jesus Christ.

And here is where we begin to see how the legacy of Stephen is being carried out, our first glimpse. Far from Stephen's death being the end of the story, we see directly how his death causes the believers to spread, to scatter, to parts of the Galilee region that may otherwise have been unreached.

Like it's spent dandelion in the wind, Stephen's death means that the seed of the gospel could be shared as far as the city of Antioch, some 500 kilometers away from Jerusalem.

And what a city it was. At the time, Antioch was estimated to be the third largest city in the Roman Empire, with a population of around half a million.

[5 : 47] A cultural mixing pot of Greek, Syrian, Jewish, Latin, and African. At this point, I'd like to take a pause. Most of us here may be young, with our whole futures ahead of us.

The world is your oyster, the possibilities limitless. But I believe we're never too young to think about the legacy that you may want to leave behind. What would you leave behind when you shrug off this mortal body?

Will it be a legacy of chasing the larger bank account, the bigger house, the flashiest toys? Or will it be a legacy like Stephen? One that reaches further into the distance, further into the future than you could ever imagine.

It's never too early. You're never too young to consider living a life and leaving a legacy modeled after our Lord Jesus Christ. The future of BCBC, I believe, will be built on believers such as these.

So that's our first glimpse. A legacy worth leaving. As we move on to Acts chapter 19, sorry, verse 19, we see here in the verse two groups of believers.

[6 : 57] Those that preach to the Greeks and those who preach to the Jews. Last week, William shared with us how the gospel of Jesus Christ is for anyone, for everyone.

We heard of how Peter's vision of a shared table ended with the apostles and believers praising God for granting repentance and the promise of life, even to Gentiles.

We see here in the city of Antioch, this revolutionary idea fully realized. Greeks, Gentiles from this bustling, busy city of Antioch, believing and turning to the Lord.

Wow. It was indeed a breakthrough moment. We live in the future now, and with that comes the gift of hindsight, right? Ideas that were revolutionary back in the day seem so simple and straightforward to us now.

13th Amendment, 1865, the abolishment of slavery in the United States. Or in September 1893, over 100 years ago, New Zealand becomes the first self-governing country in the world to give women the right to vote.

[8 : 02] Or maybe something a little bit closer to our hearts, closer to today. 800 to 1,000 years ago, Mongolian horsemen and later the Chinese thought of placing cooked chunks of meat in simmering fragrant broth, sharing this meal all around, giving birth to the modern hot pot.

Laws and ideas that seem so simple to us may have been groundbreaking stuff back when the idea was first proposed. The idea that the gospel was for the Gentiles was indeed revolutionary.

But we're reminded here, we're reminded here that unlike hot pot or women's right to vote, this idea didn't succeed just because it was a good idea.

We're reminded that true, fruitful mission is fully reliant on God. We see in the passage three times, the Lord's hand was with them.

And in 23, when he, Barnabas, arrived and saw what the grace of God had done, he was glad. And 24, because Barnabas was full of the Holy Spirit and faith, therefore a great number of people were brought to the Lord.

[9 : 12] We're reminded here that despite our best efforts, human efforts, despite maybe every intention of us here to leave a worthy legacy, that the results depend on God.

It is he who saves, he who turns people to himself. So what do you need to let go of? Are there ministries that you are holding on to tightly?

Perhaps people that you feel directly responsible for? Do we as a church endlessly stress over what we feel like should be the fruits of our labor? Friends, let's be comforted by Acts 11.

As we do the work of the Lord now and in the future, the results aren't up to us. The Holy Spirit works, the Lord moves. And whether we win great numbers for the Lord or we simply plant a seed, we're reminded to fully rely on him for the results.

Imagine if you heard the news that something amazing had happened, something that had quite literally never happened before, like the All Blacks losing to Argentina.

[10 : 21] Naturally, you'd want to find out more, right? The mother church in Jerusalem heard of these great numbers turning to the Lord and decided to send this one guy, Barnabas, to check it out.

Barnabas, we're reminded, the big-hearted encourager. True to his character, when he arrived and saw what happened and great numbers turning to the Lord, he was glad and carried on encouraging them to remain true to the Lord, as we read in verse 23.

This was a crucial moment to the church, to the growth of the church. On one hand, we had the mother church in Jerusalem, a long history as God's people, faithful to the law and fiercely proud of their heritage as Jews.

On the other hand, this budding, beginning church in Antioch, different culture, entirely different background, it would have been so easy for two branches to emerge, two different directions for the church to take.

But because of Barnabas and because of the faith the mother church had in him, in this encouraging, spirit-filled man, that threat was squashed. Ian Howard Marshall, in his commentary, describes the fact that Barnabas had the spiritual insight to recognize that God's plan was being followed at Antioch, was of decisive significance for the growth of the church.

[11 : 50] We see here that the choosing of our representatives and leaders is crucial to the growth of the church. We may be reminded of the spies in the time of Moses, who came back from Canaan after scoping out their new promised land.

Instead of reporting back on the goodness of God's provisions, they chose instead to see the impossibilities, to see the difficulties. Their failure to see the land flowing with milk and honey meant that they led the Israelites to wander 40 more years in the desert.

Friends, I believe that this glimpse number three shows us that we have a choice. Do we see God's glasses always half full? Our God is a God that provides for everything that he's promised.

Or are we scared of change, scared of new horizons? Are we spies that see the glasses half empty, ones that focus on the enemy instead of focusing on our almighty promise-keeping God?

And PCBC, as a church, I feel like we have a choice to make as well. Part of our role as a church is to make sure the representatives are wisely and prayerfully chosen.

[13 : 05] The leaders we endorse, the missionaries we send out, they reflect on us and on the gospel. May we ask God for the wisdom to choose men and women that, like Barnabas, are a blessing to not only the communities and people that they serve, but the church that send them out as well.

And so the leaders that we choose and the leaders that this mother church of ours, PCB, have chosen, how do we reflect on our church? Do we encourage unity?

Do we encourage fragmentation, splitting up? Well, I believe we as leaders have this choice to make. And this ideal church, united in Christ, I think it's all of our responsibility.

We read a little bit ahead in verse 27 and 28 that this guy Barnabas, he wasn't the only man sent from Jerusalem. Prophets, such as Agabus, made the trip down to Antioch as well.

So this guy, he predicted that a severe famine would spread over the entire Roman world. And here's where something wild happens. The church in Antioch, this small beginning budding church, hearing about this famine, they decided to collect gifts, probably money, sending back to the elders, to the mother church in Jerusalem.

[14 : 31] They didn't let the fact that they were a new church or new believers get in the way of offering what they could to the mother church. How many of us as children were willing and happy to give our hard-earned Chinese New Year money, our red pockets, back to our parents?

I certainly didn't. I'd hide them in my pockets as soon as I got them. But this church at Antioch was different. They were more than willing, each one as they could, deciding to help their brothers and sisters living in Judea.

The giving of gifts not only helped those living in Judea through some pretty tough times, but these gifts helped to unify the church even more.

There was no Jew in the mother church. There were no Gentiles in Antioch. There is no my money, your money, my resources, your resources. To be united in Christ means that gifts are to be used and shared as needed, contributing and building up God's people.

PCBC English, are we a congregation of people that remains closed off, hoarding our gifts for ourselves? Do we try to keep the best between these four walls, only for 4.30pm on a Sunday?

[15 : 48] Let us not forget where we come from. I can be honest and I say to you that I need reminders sometimes too. I need to remember that gifts should be freely given.

Blessings should flow on to other people. Perhaps you, like I, have been given many gifts to bless the church with. Let us rejoice that we are connected to such a diverse mother church.

One church, three services, many different brothers and sisters. Are there ways for you to bless others outside of this congregation? Are there opportunities to care for others in Saturday service or to serve our sisters on Sunday morning?

Perhaps the children would love your care or just some of your time. Maybe you feel called to join into the 30th year anniversary celebrations. Or as a member of this church, simply attend and participate in our quarterly meetings.

Let us be always willing and wanting to help as each of us are able. I believe that in the same way gifts freely given blesses and unites the churches of Antioch and Jerusalem, this will strengthen our relationship to our mother church as well.

[17 : 06] This united future, however, doesn't come by accident. Barnabas knew that the new believers didn't just need encouragement, what he was good at.

What they really needed was to be taught. These new converts were Gentiles with no or at best minimal connection to the Old Testament and its foundational truths about God and humanity.

Barnabas not only recognized the need for this teaching, but he was honest enough to know that as the so-called son of encouragement, he wasn't probably the best equipped for the job.

We read in verse 25 that he travels to Tarsus to bring back Saul. And we heard this from Pastor Albert's sermon a couple weeks back too. I almost imagine it would be like one of those infomercials that would play on late night TV.

Although most of you are probably too young to remember. A narrator might have said, Oh, look at all these people that have come to the Lord. How could we ever teach them all they needed to know?

[18 : 10] The camera would pan and Barnabas would pop up and he would say, I know a guy, his name is Saul and he's a wonderful teacher. But wait, there's more. Call within the next 10 minutes and I'll even go up to Tarsus and fetch him for you.

We see that's exactly what Barnabas did. After bringing Saul to Antioch, the two apostles met with the church and taught great numbers of people over an entire year.

Friends, this makes me wonder, is there a Saul somewhere in our world or even in this church, possibly connected at some level with this local congregation?

Gifted and called, but maybe discouraged, somewhat sidelined from ministry. Is there a Barnabas in the house? And maybe all that's needed is for a Barnabas to go and bring them into this family, helping them find belonging, helping them find purpose.

We go back to our two teachers. You see, friends, nowhere do we read in the Bible that following Jesus is a one and done thing. On the contrary, we're told over and over again that following Jesus Christ is a journey, a marathon, one that requires us to take up our cross daily, growing in knowledge and love until the day we meet our Lord.

[19 : 39] 2 Peter 3.18 tells us to grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Paul's prayer in Philippians reminds us that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight.

And in 2 Timothy 3.16-17, we're reminded of the word, that all scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting, and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work it should be.

And so PCBC English, how seriously do we take our spiritual growth? Some of us may be new Christians, or this may even be the first time you've suffered in this church.

Please don't misunderstand me. Our salvation is not gained through works. No, salvation is found in no one else but Jesus. For there is no other name on the heaven given to mankind by which we must be saved.

But realize now that some of us may be spiritual babies. We must grow and be continually transformed, seeing our inner salvation manifested outside into our character.

[20 : 57] Let us continue to ask God for the grace and perseverance to grow in both holiness and righteousness. Or perhaps some of us here may have known the Lord for a long time.

Maybe we sat here in these very seats and invited Jesus into our lives. Honest question. How much have you grown? How much has your life changed?

Have we moved on to solid food? As the writer of Hebrews 5 says, are we mature and able to distinguish good from evil? Or are we still on infant formula, baby's milk?

Not acquainted at all with the teachings of righteousness? Do we know and more importantly, are we known by Jesus Christ? Friends, if the answer is no or maybe, let us come to God and ask for His forgiveness.

Let us ask the Holy Spirit to work in us, to renew us, to help us know His love more, to see His glory more, to want to know His word more, seek His wisdom more.

[22 : 06] We're promised that in James 1 verse 5, if any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God who gives generously to all without finding fault. And it will be given to him.

And so our fifth glimpse is a future where we grow continuously by the grace of God. After the great crowds turn to the Lord, after the encouragement of Barnabas, after the teaching of Saul, do you know what happens?

It is here that the disciples that were meeting together in this church of Antioch, it is here they were first called Christians.

Our mother, mother, mother, mother, mother, mother, mother church, way back in Antioch, 2,000 years ago, was the birthplace of how we now describe our relationship with Jesus Christ.

Christians. This Gentile church here in Antioch was so radical, so completely out of the ordinary, that an entirely new word was needed to describe them.

[23 : 18] At the start, they may have been called crazy. Some might have called them weird. But it was clear to the surrounding citizens of Antioch, it was clear they had never seen such a diverse group of people uniting in deeply loving and committed unity.

So much so that this distinct label was needed for this group of Christ people, Christians. What an amazing sneak peek into how united the body of Christ could be.

How close are we to that ideal? What would Pakuranga or Auckland or even New Zealand say about us here at PCBC English? Would they see the risen Lord through a united church and her actions?

Or would they hardly be able to peer through the crowds as disjointed and separate as we may be? Let it not be so, church.

Let us ask God for love that binds together and not divides. Let us ask God for a willingness to step out and spread the good news, not just to those that look like us or act like us or talk like us, but people of all nations.

[24 : 40] Let us ask God for unity that is counter-cultural, extraordinary, pointing to the one and only Saviour, Jesus Christ. So much so that they may even need to come up with new labels for us.

But I'm pretty happy with the word Christian as well. Let us pursue unity with an unrelenting desire. How will the world know that Jesus is Lord and that we follow Him?

Jesus says, By this, everyone will know you are my disciples if you love one another. And so, PCBC English, what will our future hold?

I believe that the church in Antioch shows us a couple of glimpses into what the church here in Pakuranga could be. A church that is focused on leaving behind godly legacies.

A church that fully relies on the Lord for all results. A church that chooses its leaders and representatives carefully. A church that doesn't hoard, is not selfish with its gifts.

[25 : 55] A church that grows in knowledge, in faith, hope and love. A church that pursues unity in the Lord, pointing all to our Saviour.

Let us be that church. Church. Let's pray. Father God, thank you for giving us such an example like the Church of Antioch.

Thank you for the first Christians showing us what a life changed by the gospel could be. Help us to stir up one another to love and good works, encouraging each other at every opportunity.

And may you build up PCBC to be a church that glorifies you and exemplifies your Son, Jesus Christ. We ask this all.

In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.