

# THE JOURNEY

from Creation to New Creation

## Part 13 To the Ends of the Earth

### Introduction

These notes give some guidance on how to lead the group through the questions and discussion. *The additional Bible references in the notes give more details that you may find useful.*

You may want to begin by asking if anything particularly struck people as they watched the video. However, it would be wise to limit this part of the discussion to ten minutes at most.

Read Acts 11.19-30, Acts 13.1-3, 14.26-28.

### Question 1

What practical lessons can we – as individuals and as a church - learn from what we read about the church at Antioch?

Those who fled Jerusalem after Stephen's martyrdom travelled northwards as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus and Antioch, preaching only to Jews (Acts 11.19). But, in Antioch some of these people took a momentous step forward. They preached Jesus as Lord and Saviour to Greek-speaking Gentiles. And *"a great number who believed turned to the Lord"* (Acts 11.21). God had opened the door of gospel outreach to the Gentiles at Cornelius's house in Caesarea. But now the mission to the Gentiles was beginning in earnest - the final stage of Jesus's plan for gospel outreach (Acts 1.8).

Antioch was over 300 miles north of Jerusalem, and a very different kind of city. It was a cosmopolitan commercial and political centre, the third largest city in the Empire, with perhaps around 300,000 inhabitants or more.

The Antioch church grew quickly. The apostles sent Barnabas to check out what was going on there (Acts 11.22). Big-hearted Barnabas was full of the Holy Spirit (Barnabas is a nickname meaning 'son of encouragement', Acts 4.36). He had a natural gift of encouragement. Barnabas didn't insist the believers get circumcised and keep the Law. He simply encouraged them all to stay resolutely faithful to God

(Acts 11.23-24). Here in Antioch, Jew and Gentile were able to eat together freely (which included celebrating the Lord's Supper).

● **The church was serious about teaching.** Barnabas recruited Saul (Acts 11.25-26) and for a year they taught and disciplined the church at Antioch. Teaching the believers in this new church was crucial. Luke, in the Acts of the Apostles, highlights the importance of teaching as an essential aspect of evangelism (for example, Acts 2.14-36 and 13.16-41) and as a key way of bringing believers to maturity (for example, Acts 14.21-22, 18.11, and 20.17-35).

● **The church was serious about discipleship.** Here in Antioch, believers were first called 'Christians' (Acts 11.26) – a name either given to them by outsiders, or that they took themselves. The name suggests 'belonging to Christ' or 'people who habitually named the name of Christ'.

● **The church was serious about evangelism.** It began because of the evangelistic ministry of *"men of Cyprus and Cyrene"* who preached the Lord Jesus (Acts 11.20). And it's from the church here in Antioch that Paul and Barnabas set out on their first missionary journey. Paul set out on his two other missionary journeys from here, too.

● **The church was serious about including people of all kinds of backgrounds and ethnicities.** Antioch was a cosmopolitan city, with both Jews and Gentiles. It was a melting-pot of people from various races. And, it was a hotbed for philosophies, cults, and religions. The names of the leaders in Acts 13.1 suggest an ethnically diverse membership. Barnabas was from Cyprus. Simeon, called Niger, may have come from Africa. Lucius of Cyrene came from North Africa. Manaen was brought up with Herod, the ruler of Galilee when Jesus was born (Luke 3.1) and Saul was from Tarsus in what is now southern Turkey, around 150 miles from Antioch.

● **The church was serious about giving to the poor and those in need** (Acts 11.27-30) – they gave money to provide food for the Christians in Judea. We find this trait in the church in Macedonia (2 Corinthians

8.1-4); Paul encouraged the Corinthian church to follow suit (2 Corinthians 8.6-15,24).

● It seems clear that the church was serious about the participation of every member. We can see something of from the list of *"prophets and teachers"*. (Acts 13.1).

● The church was serious about the use of the gifts of the Spirit. In one of his lists of gifts Paul writes, *"... God has appointed in the church first apostles, second prophets, third teachers, ..."* (1 Corinthians 12.28). In the church at Antioch, we see all three gifts operative – apostles (Paul and Barnabas), prophets and teachers (the men listed in Acts 13.1). We can be sure that many other gifts were being used in the church at Antioch, too.

● The church was committed to worship. Acts 13.2 tells us that the prophets and teachers were *"worshipping the Lord and fasting"*.

● The church was serious about asking God for His direction. They prayed and fasted as they sought God's will. We read that, while they were worshipping the Lord and fasting, *"the Holy Spirit said, 'Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.' Then after fasting and praying they laid their hands on them and sent them off."* (Acts 13.2-3).

Read Acts 2.22-41, Acts 10.34-44, 17.22-32.

### Question 2

The passages above include Peter's very first sermon (to Jews), and Peter and Paul's sermons to non-Jews (Gentiles). How can their messages to the people help us in our own evangelism as individuals and as a church?

The basic thing it shows us is *what the early apostles preached about – the content of their gospel message*. Notice that the gospel (the good news about Jesus Christ) is a *word-based gospel*. The apostles declared the word of God with astonishing power and fluency (see Acts 2.14-40, 3.12-26). God's word spread, grew and multiplied (Acts 6.7, 12.24, 19.20). God, Who created the heavens and the Earth by His word (Genesis 1.3,6,9 etc., 2 Peter 3.5, Hebrews 11.3) now created and shaped a new people for Himself through His proclaimed and preached word.

Here are some key things that were included in the early preaching of the Gospel. This is the heart and core of the gospel. It is a life-transforming message.

- ▶ Who God is and what He is like (Acts 10.34-35, 17.24-29)
- ▶ Jesus' life – He did good, and did many miracles (Acts 2.22, 10.37-39).
- ▶ Jesus's death by crucifixion (Acts 2.23,36, 10.39).

▶ Jesus's resurrection (Acts 2.24-32, 10.40-41, 17.31-32).

▶ Jesus's exaltation God exalted Him to His right hand as Lord and Christ. (Acts 2.33-36, 10.36).

▶ Fulfilment of Old Testament prophecies Jesus fulfilled Old Testament prophecies (Acts 2.16-21,25-31,34, 10.43).

▶ Repentance People are exhorted to repent (Acts 2.38,17.30)

▶ Salvation People are exhorted to believe in Jesus and are promised forgiveness (Acts 2.38, 10.43).

▶ Pouring out and gift of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2.33,38-39).

▶ Baptism People are exhorted to be baptised (Acts 2.38)

▶ Judgment Jesus Christ will judge everyone (Acts 10.42, 17.31).

*The facts of Jesus's life, death and resurrection and exaltation are foundational to the Gospel message.* The Gospel message and offer of salvation rests upon *what actually happened*. Christianity and the whole Biblical record are embedded in history. It is not fundamentally a moral code or a philosophy.

There is also something at first sight rather puzzling – the three sermons in the passages we've read don't mention God's love. In John's Gospel we read *"For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life."* (John 3.16). Peter and Paul may well have mentioned God's love, of course, but this isn't recorded. Why do you think this is?

The apostles' first sermons made Jesus's resurrection a key point of their preaching. Dr Simon Greenleaf, a famous professor of law at Harvard University, examined the historical evidence for the resurrection of Jesus Christ. He applied the principles in his study *An Examination of the Testimony of the Four Evangelists by the Rules of Evidence Administered in the Courts of Justice*. He concluded that there is more evidence for Jesus's resurrection than for just about any other event in history.

The New Testament writers took pains to emphasise that the resurrection actually happened and could be verified (Acts 1.3, Acts 2.32, 1 Corinthians 15.3-8). Declaring that Jesus has risen from the dead was part of what someone must believe and confess in order to be saved (see Romans 10.9). Paul, too, emphasises how crucial the resurrection is. *"... if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain."* (1 Corinthians 15.14)