



**MOLDED FOR A MISSION**  
**Acts 11:19-30**

In the very first chapter of the exciting book of Acts in **verse 8** we read “But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you – and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth.” (NIV)

The book of Acts tells the incredible journey of how the Spirit moves the church into the world. Luke begins his story with the outpouring of the Spirit on the day of Pentecost and the honeymoon period of the Spirit-filled community – which was abruptly terminated by the opposition of the Jewish authorities.<sup>1</sup> However, the story could not stop because in **Acts 4:12** it states: “Salvation is found in no one else – for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved.”

The book of Acts declares, “God still ruled the affairs of the world – we humans never have the last word.<sup>2</sup> Yes, the story of Jesus doesn’t end with Jesus. It continues in the lives of those who believe in him. God is living in them – and of course – in us.<sup>3</sup>”

The first 7 chapters of the book of Acts are centered in and around Jerusalem. However, we read in **chapter 8:1** that after the stoning of Stephen by Saul and his crew – a great persecution broke out against the church at Jerusalem – and all except the Apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria. They seek refuge in the safer regions of Samaria and Judea.

However, we know that whenever opposition arises – God often uses these events as an opportunity to fulfill the promise we began this sermon with in **Acts 1:8**.

One of the great truths we learn from the story of Joseph in the bible in **Genesis 50:20** is “You meant it for evil – God used it for the good.” The plan of Jewish authorities backfires on them. A great reversal takes place.

God takes these religious and political refugees and turns them into missionaries. Paul would later write in **Romans 8:28**, “God works all things to the good to those who believe.” When men try to rule – God often overrules.

It was the late Dr. James Boice who taught me the foundational importance of the book of Genesis and the Abrahamic Covenant. We must not forget that God chose Abraham in order that “all the peoples on earth will be blessed through you.” While the

message of salvation was from and through the Jews – it was not for the Jews alone. God had molded them for a greater mission.

One of the reasons it took 25 years from the initial call of Abraham till its completion was that God was doing more than providing a father for Isaac – he was building and molding the father of a great nation with a far-reaching responsibility. The great prophet Isaiah reminds them of this charge in **Isaiah 42:6**,

“I, the Lord, have called you  
in righteousness.  
I will take hold of your hand.  
I will keep you and will make you  
to be a covenant for the people  
and a light for the Gentiles.” (NIV)

I would like to share with you the image of a 3-step ladder. The first step of the ladder occurs when Philip, the evangelist in **Acts 8:5** begins to preach in a certain city of Samaria to its citizens about Jesus Christ. However, the Samaritans and Jews did share a common heritage. We know from the gospel of John in **chapter 4** – the famous conversation between Jesus and the Samaritan woman who was a five-time loser.

We know in **John 4:42** that some Samaritans actually came to believe that this man (Jesus) was the Savior of the world. So while the first step of the ladder is important – it does not compare to our story in **Acts 11:19-30**.

The second step is the famous story and conversation between Peter and Cornelius in **Acts 11:1-18**. However, from our lesson we know that Cornelius was a God-fearer like Lydia who was on the fringes of the Jewish faith. The Ethiopian eunuch in **Acts 8:26-40** also was a God-fearer – and he was reading the Old Testament book of Isaiah when Philip meets him. Important foundations are being laid which culminates in our lesson today.<sup>4</sup>

In **verse 19** – “Now those who had been scattered by the persecution in connection with Stephen traveled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus, and Antioch telling the message only to Jews.” Now to **verse 20**: “Some of them, however, men from Cyrus and Cyrene, went to Antioch and began to speak to Greeks also – telling them the good news about the Lord Jesus.” This verse tells of one of the greatest events in church history. Now, for the first time – the gospel is intentionally and deliberately preached to the Gentiles.<sup>5</sup> Of course Jesus modeled it – and mentored the disciples in it – but it finally took root. A culture of change is about to explode.

Yes, Christianity is launched on its world-wide mission. We saw how the mission grew and enlarged when Paul went to Philippi two weeks ago. We read in **verse 21**, “The Lord’s hand was with them and a great number of people believed and turned to the Lord.”

Now, did you notice in **verse 21** that we don't even know the names of the people who – with faith and boldness – fulfilled their mission and ministry?

There was not an apostle – a trained clergy – a Doctor of Divinity-credentialed person around. The church was founded by ordinary people like you. Not one of them had taken Dr. Kennedy's 'Evangelism Explosion' course, or Bill Bright's 'Four Spiritual Laws.' They just preached and talked about Jesus Christ. John Wesley, our spiritual mentor, was once asked the secret to his evangelistic outreach ministry and mission. He said, "I offer them Christ."

John Wesley wrote in his journal one day after a visit to Bristol "I came into the city – and I brought them Jesus." This is what they did in Antioch.

The late Dr. James Kennedy tells the story of his first year of ministry in his first church. They started with 50 people. After one year of his great preaching and teaching the attendance was 25. It was then he learned from the Spirit – his job was to train ordinary men and women like you to reach others for Christ. This is how that great church in Fort Lauderdale was built.

In **Acts 11:21** we read "The Lord's hand was with them – and a great number of people believed and turned to the Lord." The arm of the Lord represents God's power to save. It stands for God's ability to guide and prosper the efforts of his servants. It means that God is blessing your efforts on his behalf. In **Isaiah 59:1** we read "Surely the arm of the Lord is not too short to save – nor his ears too dull to hear." (NIV)

As Dr. John Stott reminds us, "The same Holy Spirit which energized those ordinary – persecuted believers in Antioch and propelled them to become the center of the World Missionary Movement is still with us today." The hand of the Lord can be with us as well.

One of the questions I want you to write down and begin to ask in your Sunday School classes and study groups is this: "Who is the 'Gentile' that God wants you to reach?" Maybe your Gentile is your new mother-in-law or step-daughter or neighbor down the street who looks different from you. Maybe it is the teenager in Goth clothing – or children and youth from Franklin Street. If comfort and safety is what you want in life – go buy a grave plot. If you want to be fully alive – accept your mission.

Rick Warren teaches us in chapter 36 of **THE PURPOSE-DRIVEN LIFE**, "You were made for a mission. God is at work in this world and God wants you to join him. This assignment is called your mission. God wants you to have both a ministry in the body of Christ – and a mission in the world. Your ministry is service to believers – and your mission is your service to unbelievers."<sup>6</sup> Every Sunday after the Benediction you are entering the mission field.

The news of this bold adventure reached the ears of the church leaders and folks back at Jerusalem in **verse 22**. They wondered amongst themselves – 'What is going

to happen to good ole First Church – Jerusalem? How could you dare to change the traditions and customs?’ We know from the epistle of James that they sat people in the church house based on wealth and position. What do you mean that people can worship at 8:30 a.m. and without a hymnbook? Why do men and women have to sit together in the church house? Who said they could wear blue jeans and pantsuits?

So the church leaders in the providence of God sent Barnabas. Barnabas is one of the great saints of the church. We know he was generous – full of encouragement – and big-hearted. Barnabas was a Levite from the island of Cyprus. He spoke Greek and was at home in Greek culture.

Most importantly in **verse 24** he was a good man and full of the Holy Spirit. This means he obeyed God’s will rather than human authority and tradition. He was willing to submit and risk for the sake of the gospel.

In **verse 23** when Barnabas arrived we are told – “He saw the grace of God and rejoiced.” Barnabas could clearly see God’s grace in the changed lives of the believers of Antioch. The Holy Spirit was alive and well and was doing a beautiful thing among them. He reports that there was nothing to write home to be worried about.

As Barnabas lived among them – he encouraged them to remain true to the Lord with all their hearts. In order to help in their journey of faith – he knew they needed a good Bible teacher and leader. This leader had to be able to communicate the faith to both the believers who had Jewish heritage – and those of Greek heritage. He must be skilled in language and the Bible to meet the double challenge of Jewish and Gentile attacks upon their faith. We know in **Acts 2:42**, they devoted themselves to the Apostle’s teaching. To build a strong church in this pagan culture – it had to be rooted and grounded in the word of God.

It was then that Barnabas remembered how the Holy Spirit had led him to Saul of Tarsus – now Paul – almost 10 years ago. Here was the perfect teacher to lead and teach them in the ways of the Lord.

So Barnabas and Saul (now Paul) team taught the church family for one year. Barnabas knew he could not do the job alone – and was willing to share the spotlight with Paul – and eventually removed himself from the scene. This demonstrates he was a man of humility – and placed his ego on the altar of the Lord.

Did you know that the Apostle Paul spent over 10 years after his dramatic conversion experience back in the region he was raised and nurtured in before this missional opportunity was presented by Barnabas? People often ask, ‘What was God doing with Paul during this time?’ God had to develop the character – attitude – and perseverance needed for the assignment that he would eventually receive. The history of the church demonstrates what an important assignment it was. How many of us would have been willing to wait upon the Lord during this stretch of time? Our world is geared to the ‘microwave method’ – fast and easy. God often uses the slower ‘crockpot

method.’ This mission to the Gentiles was what Paul was being molded for. Ask God today what mission you are being molded for that has your name written on it.

Our text tells us that it was at Antioch in **verse 26** that the believers were first called “Christians.” These people were the “Christ folks.” It was a name – like Methodist – uttered in contempt. However, Charles and John Wesley and the Holy Club took it and made it known to all the world. By their work and witness, the name became one of respect and admiration. I often share with you that many will never see the Christ unless they see him in us. The people saw “Christ” – not Caesar – in the believers at Antioch and it would help transform the world.

In **verses 27 and 28** we see that one of God’s servants comes to share that a great famine will come upon the saints back at First Church - Jerusalem. The response of the saints at the church of Antioch is for me the clearest evidence of the grace of God at work in them. Because they were now Christians first and Gentiles second – it made no difference who the folks were back at Jerusalem. They knew they had to help fellow Christians who were in need. They took a collection and sent it by way of Paul and Barnabas. That’s how it is with the grace of God. Once you truly experience it – you simply pass it on. The grace of God is always shared – never hoarded.

When I begin the weekly task of sermon preparation – there are always 2 questions that I keep before me in the study. They are: “What do I want you to know?” and “What do I want you to do?”

In this sermon I have asked you, “Who are the Gentiles God is calling you to minister to and reach?”

Who will you be a Barnabas to? Who needs your generous support and big heart? Who needs you to come alongside to be part of a team ministry?

Will you allow God the time to mold you for the mission assignment he has just for you – even if it takes years to do?

Will you pass on the amazing grace of God that you have received – to the person who you know is so desperate to hear it?

Our God is still at work. What happened at Antioch can happen again.

Amen and amen.

Reverend Eric S. Ritz

July 13, 2008 – preached at both services

All Rights Reserved – Copyrighted 7/13/08

## ENDNOTES

---

<sup>1</sup> John Stott, **THE SPIRIT, THE CHURCH, AND THE WORLD: The Message of Acts**, InterVarsity Press, Downers Grove, ILL, 1990, page 5.

<sup>2</sup> Eugene H. Peterson, **CONVERSATIONS: The Message Bible with Its Translator**, NavPress, Colorado Springs, CO, 2007, page 1687.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid, page 1680.

<sup>4</sup> William Barclay, **“THE ACTS OF THE APOSTLES, The Daily Study Bible Series,”** Westminster Press, revised edition, 1976, page 88. The image of the ladder and some of the material here is indebted to Dr. Barclay.

<sup>5</sup> Barclay, Ibid, page 88.

<sup>6</sup> Rick Warren, **THE PURPOSE-DRIVEN LIFE**, Zondervan Publishing, Grand Rapids, MI, 2002, page 281.

### EDITOR'S NOTE:

Pastor Eric will not be preaching on July 20, 2008. Pastor Eric will return to the pulpit on July 27<sup>th</sup>. All of Pastor Eric's sermons can be found on our web site [www.eumcnh.org](http://www.eumcnh.org). Click on SERMONS in the menu section.