

God Uses Ordinary People & Ordinary Means

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Acts 11:19-30

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Acts 11:19-30 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. ²⁰ 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. ²¹ And the hand of the Lord was with them, and a great number who believed turned to the Lord. ²² The report of this came to the ears of the church in Jerusalem, and they sent Barnabas to Antioch. ²³ 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, ²⁴ for he was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and of faith. And a great many people were added to the Lord. ²⁵ So Barnabas went to Tarsus to look for Saul, ²⁶ 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. ²⁷ Now in these days prophets came down from Jerusalem to Antioch. ²⁸ And one of them named Agabus stood up and foretold by the Spirit that there would be a great famine over all the world (this took place in the days of Claudius). ²⁹ So the disciples determined, everyone according to his ability, to send relief to the brothers living in Judea. ³⁰ And they did so, sending it to the elders by the hand of Barnabas and Saul.

The year 1922 marked the first serious attempt by an expedition to climb to the summit of Mt Everest. For years it was considered an impossible feat and many turned back and some died attempting the climb. But 31 years later, in 1953, an ordinary man named Edmund Hillary, who had been a bee-keeper in the summer to support his winter hobby of climbing finally made it to the summit with a Sherpa guide named Tenzing Norgay.

Even after Hillary and Norgay reached the peak, most summit attempts failed. By 1990, 37 years later, the success rate for reaching the summit was still only 18%. By 2012 though, the success rate for reaching the summit was over 56%. In 2010, Jordan Romero became the youngest climber to summit Everest at age 13.

Since Hillary made it to the top, as of 2013, over 4,000 climbers have ascended the summit of Mt Everest. Now, there are long lines of hundreds of people each year and Tibet is considering installing ladders in places to make it easier and it is now something of a tourist destination for the rich. What was once previously unheard of and thought to be unreachable is now relatively commonplace.

In the passage we read earlier from the book of Acts, we are reading of a great shift from spreading the good news about Jesus Christ within Jewish circles to the great expansion of the good news to all people everywhere. Those who were once thought of as unreachable and even untouchable are now brought into the church and we see a great divide being crossed by ordinary, anonymous disciples of Jesus. And Luke is highlighting something here for all of us – he is highlighting that God uses ordinary people to expand His church.

Main Idea: God uses ordinary people and ordinary means to expand His church.

Yes, this account tells of Barnabas and Saul – two men that God used mightily in the expansion of the church. But it really is not all about Barnabas and Saul. The account is all about God and how He uses ordinary people and ordinary means to expand His church. And right at the outset of the passage, we can see God using ordinary people – people who were perhaps beekeepers or tradesmen, people who were engaged in normal everyday commerce and business and life

Back in Acts 8, there was a great persecution that arose against the church after Stephen was murdered by stoning of preaching the good news about Jesus. The church had been hesitant to carry the good news out from Jerusalem, but God had used persecution and hardship and suffering – all bad things to accomplish His purposes. Persecution wasn't good but God is able to use even all bad things to bring about His plans for good. Now, the people who were scattered, they went as far as Phoenicia and Cyprus and Antioch.

In Matthew 28:18-20, Jesus had said to His disciples, *"All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age."*

In Matthew, Jesus had explained that He had the authority to command them to make disciples but He didn't mention that He had all authority because of His command to go and make disciples. You see, in giving the command to "make disciples of all nations", Jesus was saying that anyone in all of the nations could become one of God's chosen people. Anyone could become a member of God's family now. The reason why He prefaced the command to make disciples of all nations with "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me", is that Jesus wanted to make sure the disciples knew that Jesus had the authority to call all people from all nations to be a part of His people, expanding God's people from only the Jews to anyone who would believe in Jesus. And now, Jesus was calling them to make disciples of all nations, based on His authority.

Then, in Acts 1:8, the last thing Jesus said to His disciples while He was here on earth was, *"But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth."* A great persecution arose against the early church then, after Stephen was stoned and the church was scattered into Judea and Samaria. God was moving them out so that they could obey His command.

But for some reason, the disciples still hadn't taken the gospel to people of other nations, until God made Peter see that He should not consider the Gentiles unclean any longer. Those that were scattered made a practice of speaking only to the Jews generally. Now those who were scattered... traveled as far as Phoenicia and Cyprus and Antioch, speaking the Word to no one except Jews.

For some reason, the church in general had grown comfortable. They had not been deliberate or intentional about taking the good news to non-Jews. That is, until God send an angel to speak to both Cornelius and Peter to coordinate them hearing from Him, so that it was clear to Peter now that God shows no partiality. And now, we see that in verse 20, Luke tells us of some men from Cyprus and Cyrene were speaking to the Hellenists also, preaching the Lord Jesus. *"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."* So, at the outset, we see that...

1. God spreads His news through ordinary people (19-21)

Plastic trash has become a big problem in the world's oceans and there haven't been any good solutions thus far. For the most part, people have assumed it is just too hard and too vast of a problem. But now, 19-year-old Boyan Slat has unveiled plans to create an Ocean Cleanup Array that could remove 7,250,000 tons of plastic waste from the world's oceans. His solution is simple but brilliant and it consists of a series of floating booms and platforms to collect the trash passively. He started an online fundraising effort a little while ago and has raised over \$2.1 million dollars and is beginning the project with a team of over 100 people. He is just an otherwise ordinary person spreading the word about the need to clean up our oceans and he is making headway.

But humanity has an even bigger problem than trash – we have a problem that has infected all of humanity and every nation on earth, every person on earth has been poisoned and tainted and corrupted by sin. But God

made a way for man to be clean, to be free from all of our sins and God sent His Son to come to earth as a child; to live life fully and perfectly as a man, to say no to every temptation that we experience and then to take our place and suffer and die for all of the sins of the world, so that whoever believes on Him and places their trust in Him, turning away from their sins and turning to live for God is saved.

This is an amazing reversal of the biggest problem we could ever face and it is freely available to all who will say “yes God, I admit I am a sinner and I can’t get clean on my own, yes God I must be cleaned by You, so please clean me God. God, I trust that You punished Jesus for all of my sins and that is my only hope. God now, I turn from living for myself and I want to live for You with all that I am, because You have loved me by calling me and forgiving me and I belong to You now.”

This is a relatively simple message but it has the most amazing effects for all who believe it and place their faith in God. And this passage in Acts shows us that God uses ordinary people to accomplish His great plans – to accomplish His great rescue mission – His great clean-up of humanity if you will. What an amazing reversal from Acts 6. You see, back in Acts 6, it was people from Cyprus and Cyrene who rose up and disputed against Stephen and brought him before the Jewish council to be judged. But now we see the power of the Gospel at work as some of the people from Cyprus and Cyrene are now the ones who are breaking the cultural taboos and boldly preaching the Lord Jesus to the Hellenists or Greeks.

They brought the good news about Jesus Christ to Antioch, the third largest city in the Greco-Roman world, smaller only than Rome and Alexandria at the time with a population of around 500,000. Antioch was a multi-ethnic city, made up of Greeks, Syrians, Jews, Phoenicians, Persians, Arabs, Egyptians and Indians. It was a cosmopolitan city, full of a variety of religions and it was famous for the worship of the goddess Daphne, where temple prostitution was common. It was a cosmopolitan, decadent and depraved city, founded by one of Alexander the Great’s generals 300 years earlier on a river about 15 miles from the Mediterranean coast.

Antioch was far from a typical Jewish city - it was like the Las Vegas of its day. And it was here that God began the spread of the Gospel as a small number of people came and began to preach the Lord Jesus. It must have been potentially intimidating to preach Jesus in the midst of this large, multi-ethnic environment full of so many religious beliefs. But, apparently, these men of Cyprus and Cyrene were undaunted by the different cultures and beliefs and they preached Jesus Christ as the Lord.

Notice though that no one was telling them to do this. It isn’t clear that anyone had directed their efforts or instructed them to do this. They were just so affected by a passion for Jesus personally, that they preached Jesus as the Lord wherever they went. And God blessed their preaching, because it says in verse 21 that, “*And the hand of the Lord was with them, and a great number who believed turned to the Lord.*”

When it says the hand of the Lord was with them, what does it mean? At the very least, it means that the Lord was blessing and affirming their preaching the Lord Jesus to the Gentiles. It means that God was guiding them and directing them. It means that God was empowering and enabling them. But I think that it could mean more. You see, if you were a first-century Jew reading this, Luke’s choice of words may have reminded you of the passage in Jeremiah when the prophet talked about making a new covenant, to replace the one God made when he took them **by the hand** to bring them out of Egypt.

Jeremiah 31:31-34 "Behold, the days are coming, declares the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah, 32 not like the covenant that I made with their fathers on the day when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, my covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, declares the LORD. 33 But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the LORD: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts. And I will be their God, and they shall be my people. 34 And no longer shall each one teach his neighbor and each his

brother, saying, 'Know the LORD,' for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, declares the LORD. For I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more."

Luke wrote this Scripture deliberately choosing this vivid, personal language to speak of how God was with them. It brings to mind a Father gently leading His children by the hand or a strong protector lifting them up, setting them on the path. So, now, as they are preaching the good news about Jesus, they have their Father's blessing and help and the hand of the Lord was with them, to bring many into the new covenant that He has established. It tells us what the result of this was too – Luke says, ***and a great number who believed turned to the Lord.***

A great number who believed turned to the Lord. He didn't just write and a great number believed in the Lord – Luke indicates that saving faith in God entails more than just belief alone – it includes believing and then culminates in turning to the Lord. This means it is not enough to merely believe – there must be a turning to the Lord. And a great number of those who believed did turn to the Lord.

Something interesting to note here, is that even though this is the first major time we see the Gospel spreading to Gentiles after Peter's preaching to Cornelius, these people who preached Jesus Christ and saw a great number of converts are left unnamed by the Bible. These were very average disciples of Jesus Christ. But they went preaching Jesus. And as they did, idols fell and people were convicted, they believed and turned to Jesus.

In the midst of this massive city of darkness and depravity, God shined His great light through ordinary followers of Jesus. Isn't it true too, that the majority of those who preach Jesus Christ will never have their names listed in any books and never have any movies made about them. They are unnamed, daring pioneers, risking all for Jesus and yet they are unnamed, even though they are very significant to the work of God.

Ajith Fernando once said, "Some of the most significant work for the kingdom has been done by unknown witnesses who are obedient to Christ right where they are and where they do not attract much attention." (Fernando, p353).

So now, many Hellenists or Greeks – Jews and Gentiles alike were saved and brought into His church through ordinary people. And then we see that God used Barnabas to do something ordinary to establish His church. Verses 22 and 23 tell us *"The report of this came to the ears of the church in Jerusalem, and they sent Barnabas to Antioch. 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..."* God used Barnabas to establish His church through encouragement. Barnabas didn't practice magic or do anything spectacular – he simply encouraged them. And the second truth that we see from this passage is that...

2. God establishes His church through encouragement (22-24)

This was ground-breaking news. The church in Jerusalem could have sent anyone. A great number of Gentiles had turned to the Lord. They could have sent any of the apostles or other leaders in the church – maybe Phillip, who had preached to the Ethiopian Eunuch. But they sent Joseph, whom they had nicknamed Barnabas, which means son of encouragement, as if he was born from encouragement because that was such a key part of his character, probably because he was such an encouragement to the church.

Maybe that was why they sent him – because they knew he would be a source of great encouragement to these new Gentile believers or possibly it was because he was raised on the island of Cyprus. We don't know why he was chosen for such an important and prominent role, but Luke writes in verse 23, *"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..."*

In the Old Testament, when God sent Jonah to the pagan city of Ninevah and he finally went and warned them to repent; to turn from their wickedness and turn to God, they responded and God relented. But do you remember how Jonah reacted? He was sad – he was depressed because the people whom he hated had actually turned and received God's grace.

That isn't what we see here from Barnabas is it? Barnabas saw the grace or favor of God on the Gentiles and he was glad. The word used here actually means to rejoice. And in response, he saw that they needed to be taught. They needed to be exhorted to follow the Lord and not turn away. So, he strongly encouraged them to remain faithful to the Lord – to purposefully cling to God with all their hearts.

Then, Luke writes that the reason Barnabas responded this way, in contrast with the way that those of the circumcision party originally responded to Peter, was that Barnabas was a good man. *"For he was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and of faith. And a great many people were added to the Lord."* Nowhere else does Acts characterize someone as good – but here, Barnabas is called a good man.

But if you recall, Barnabas had been a resident of Jerusalem and had sold a piece of property and laid it at the feet of the apostles. He had supported Paul, when others were hesitant initially and he enabled Paul to be reconciled to the church in Jerusalem and the apostles. So here, Biblically speaking, Luke says he was a good man, because he was glad – he rejoiced when he saw the grace of God at work and he encouraged others to remain faithful to the Lord from the heart.

Not only was he a good man though, he was full of the Holy Spirit and faith and the result was that a great many people were added to the Lord. I think we need a church full of people like Barnabas don't we? If we want to see the Kingdom of God spread and the church be well established, built up and equipped, we need to be a people who are like Barnabas.

You see, Barnabas saw past the weaknesses and saw further than the past sins of Paul. He saw the grace of God at work and he responded to the grace of God and encouraged the grace of God. He responded to the grace of God and wanted to see the grace of God spread, so he sold property and gave to the church in Jerusalem. He also responded to the grace of God at work in Paul and wasn't fearful of who he was now – he saw God's grace in the life of the new convert Paul and he encouraged it and promoted the grace of God.

Now, here in Acts 11, Barnabas is looking past any racist tendencies and looking past the cultural differences and seeing God's grace at work here in Antioch. And, in response to seeing God's grace, he rejoices in God's grace and yet again he goes about encouraging the new converts to do everything that they can – to purpose unwaveringly to remain faithful to Jesus.

Isn't that good counsel for us today as well? We should do everything we can to purpose to remain faithful to Jesus with all our hearts. Alexander Maclaren once aptly said, "Many of us are so busy thinking about Christianity that we have lost hold of Christ". We need to steadfastly purpose to not lose sight of Jesus with all our hearts.

Well, I think Barnabas was probably full of faith because he could see God's grace at work and he could see God's grace at work because he saw with eyes of faith through the enabling of the Holy Spirit. And the ministry of Barnabas inspired others to desire God, to expect God and to depend on God. Don't you want to be like that? I think we can, as we have faith in God, rely on the Holy Spirit and we look for the grace of God and encourage others in God's grace to press in to Jesus.

So, as Barnabas goes about encouraging the believers there, a great many people are added to the Lord and he realized that he couldn't do this work of disciple-making on his own. As the church grew, Barnabas wasn't looking to have it all be about him. Maybe he was laying in his bed one night thinking about all that he needed

to do. There are people to be taught and work to be done and there is no way I can do it all on my own. So, we see the third truth that Luke is giving to us in this account is that...

3. God grows His church through teaching (25-26)

Barnabas realizes that the church is growing numerically but they need to grow spiritually, so he does and looks for Saul. And he thought of Saul. The last time they were together was about 8-10 years previous when Paul had been sent there from Jerusalem by the apostles for his own safety. It doesn't say Barnabas heard a word from God – he thought about someone else that he knew who could help him in the work and he went to go get him.

He was more concerned with caring for and instructing the people who had been added to the Lord and so he goes looking for Saul, because he wants Saul to help teach the people. He realizes he can't do the work on his own and he needed someone else to help instruct the people. He wasn't trying to get the glory for himself – he was humble and knew he needed help to accomplish what God had called him to do and wanted someone else to help him accomplish God's work. So he travels to Saul's hometown a few days travel away and searches him out.

Then, verse 26 tells us that, *“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.”* We don't know how Barnabas convinced Saul to come with him or what he said but he recruited Saul to come with him and relocate from Tarsus, his original home town, where he had fled after they sought to kill him, and Paul left the comfort of Tarsus to go to Antioch.

Notice that it doesn't say that Paul heard a special word from God either. Barnabas recruited him and he went. Sometimes, it is just that simple in the church as well. We don't need to hear a specific word from God – we can just see a need and respond to help out in the work. So, it says that Saul went to Antioch and together they met with the church and taught a great many people for a whole year.

Then, as a side note, Luke mentions that it was in Antioch that the disciples were first called Christians. People so associated the disciples with the teaching that Jesus is the Christ – the chosen One of God that they called them Christians. Their identity and what they spoke about and what they lived for was so wrapped up in Jesus and who He is as the Christ that they became known as Christians to everyone around. The people of Antioch recognized something so different about these disciples of Christ that they made up a new word, a new nickname for them – Christians. Maybe it was said as an insult – maybe it was said derisively – but it became a badge of honor for them and millions of others since, who were not ashamed to have their lives defined by Jesus, the Christ.

I wonder if that could be said of those of us who call ourselves Christians today. What would people call us if they observed our behavior and listened to the content of our speech? Maybe we should ask ourselves, “is the content of my speech and, my identity and what I live for so much about Jesus as the Christ, the chosen One of God, who came to take away the sins of the world, that people would begin to refer to us as “Christians”? Is Jesus Christ the One from whom we get our identity? Do we live for Him and speak about Him wherever we go so much that people know us as and call us Christians?

Well, the result of their teaching was that the believers there were living like Christ so much that they were called “Christ-followers”. And these Christ-followers clearly were not living their lives for themselves alone, because verses 27-30 tell us of their response when they encountered a prophecy. They weren't just thinking of themselves. They were grateful for the gift of salvation that they had received and so they gave financially.

4. God supports His church through giving (27-30)

Verse 27 tells us, *“Now in these days prophets came down from Jerusalem to Antioch.”* Apparently, the gift of prophecy and those who frequently were given the gift of prophecy was not uncommon in the early church. Because it says that prophets came down from Jerusalem. We can see that these prophets were not writing Scripture, so they were not like the Old Testament Prophets and their New Testament equivalent of Apostles. But they heard words inspired by God and shared them with others.

Sometimes, in the New Testament, they were given insight into the hearts of others, like we see in 1 Corinthians 14:24-25 and at other times, like here, they were given a glimpse of what was to come, although at times, they prophesied imperfectly, as Agabus later did in Acts 21, when he was right that Paul would be bound but he got some of the details wrong. In this case, Agabus got the big picture right and verse 28 tells us that, *“And one of them named Agabus stood up and foretold by the Spirit that there would be a great famine over all the world.”*

Luke is then clear to point out that what Agabus foretold came about and he says, ***“this took place in the days of Claudius”***. In fact, a severe famine struck the entire Roman Empire sometime after AD 41 and there was also a famine in Judea from AD 44 to AD 48. So, plenty of warning was given because it was at least a few years before it would occur. But, even though it wasn't a current need, the disciples there responded to the prophecy and verses 29-30 tells us, *“So the disciples determined, everyone according to his ability, to send relief to the brothers living in Judea. And they did so, sending it to the elders by the hand of Barnabas and Saul.”*

At this point, the church in Antioch wasn't responding to a current need, they were giving in response to a need that they believed would occur. More significantly, they were giving to their predominantly Jewish brothers in Jerusalem. You see, this is a prime example of how the Gospel is meant to tear down the dividing walls of ethnic and cultural differences and hostilities and to unite us as one family in Christ Jesus.

This wasn't mandatory – it wasn't a tax or a mandated amount, but Luke writes that the disciples determined, everyone according to their ability, and as they were able, they sent relief to their Jewish brothers. They were giving to sustain the church in Jerusalem. I like how John Stott speaks of this passage when he says, *“Whatever our political and economic convictions may be, these are plainly Biblical principles, that is, ability on the one hand, need on the other, and how to relate them to each other, these principles should characterize the family of God.”*

They were giving to sustain the mission there and the support of the apostles and the church in Jerusalem, from whom they had greatly benefitted and from whom many more could benefit. So why does Luke mention this? He mentions it probably for a few reasons. Perhaps one is to show the importance of giving towards the mission of the gospel and giving to sustain the needs of the church.

I think he also tells the reader of this giving to demonstrate that the good news of Jesus reconciles those who were previously hostile to one another. Maybe he gives us this account to show that the early church saw themselves as responsible for the care of their brothers and sisters elsewhere. And it also demonstrated that there was oneness in the church that went across all geographical and ethnic boundaries and it was based on their new identity in Jesus Christ.

But I believe Luke wrote this as well because God wanted the reader and He wants us to see that God uses the ordinary means of giving to support His mission. God uses the ordinary means of giving to support His church and expand the good news about Jesus Christ. So, we must ask ourselves, are we determined only to support ourselves only or are we determined to give, everyone according to his ability? Are we caring only for ourselves or are we caring for the needs of others? Are we supporting ourselves or are we supporting the mission God has called us to and the church God has made us a part of?

God uses ordinary people and ordinary means to expand His church

Most of us are pretty ordinary people but God can use ordinary people to accomplish extraordinary things. So, we must ask ourselves, are we spreading His good news in our daily lives and business? Do we see our work as a means to give testimony to the good news and to demonstrate the effects of the good news through how we work? Are we a means of encouragement and are we pointing others to steadfastly remain faithful to Jesus? Are we pursuing teaching to grow personally and are we teaching others about God and His Word? And then, lastly, are we giving to support the mission God has called us to? If so, God will use these very ordinary means through very ordinary people to expand His church and bring many people to Himself.

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