*DEVOTIONAL*

January 29 – February 3

Barnabas’ *Witness*

**Monday, January 29 Acts 11:1-18**

*“Peter explained everything to them”*

A revolutionary thing had happened in the life of the church: the Gentiles had received the word of God and the Holy Spirit had come upon them, just as it had upon the Jews, and the news about it spread through the church. When Peter arrived in Jerusalem, “those of the circumcision” criticized him. Luke is probably referring to the group within the church who required circumcision of all Gentile believers. The objection mentioned is that Peter and his friends ate with “uncircumcised” men. It shows how important the issue of table fellowship was to Jews.

In response to the criticism Peter explained what had happened. Luke’s report is an extended summary of chapter 10. This repetition is an indication of the importance Luke attached to that story. Peter stressed that he had with him six brothers who could confirm everything that he was telling the leaders in Jerusalem. He also emphasized the reality that the Holy Spirit came on Cornelius and company, just as the Spirit had come on Jewish believers. The evidence of God’s grace was too great for further objection.

*By the power of your Spirit, Lord, anyone may be saved. Amen.*

**Tuesday, January 30 Acts 11:19-21**

*“A great number believed and turned to the Lord”*

Some of the Christians who had fled Jerusalem after Stephen’s death went to Phoenicia, Cyprus and Antioch, but they shared the gospel with Jews only. However, some Christians came from Cyprus and Cyrene, and they shared the gospel in Antioch with Gentiles as well. While Luke tells us where these daring believers who took the lead in this great step forward in the life of the church hailed from, we do not know their names. Regardless, they were among the first to share the Good News with Gentiles in that part of the Roman world.

Antioch in North Syria was the largest of sixteen cities in the eastern Mediterranean bearing that name. There were so named because many kings of the Seleucid dynasty (who ruled the eastern part of Alexander the Great’s empire after his death) bore the name Antiochus. The city had a population estimated to be about 300,000. A large Jewish population lived there, estimates of which range from 22,000 to 65,000. It remained an important center of Christianity for many centuries.

*Thank you for anonymous Christians, Lord, who spread the word. Amen.*

**Wednesday, January 31 Acts 11:22-26**

*“They sent Barnabas to Antioch”*

The problem with unknown people doing significant things (see yesterday’s devotion) is that they lack credentials for others to accept the validity of what they are doing. Therefore, a known and respected person was sent by the Jerusalem church to check out what was happening in Antioch. They made a wise choice in Barnabas, for he had distinguished himself as an encourager and was known for his godliness. Moreover, he was a Jew from Cyprus, like some of those who had preached to Gentiles in Antioch.

Soon Barnabas realized that he needed help to adequately pastor the flock in Antioch. Thus, he went in search of Saul and brought him back to help in a teaching ministry that went on for a whole year. The trip to Tarsus was about a hundred miles – a major undertaking. According to the time-line Paul lays out in some of his letters, about ten years have elapsed since his conversion. Another reason why Antioch has a special place in the history of Christianity is that here the disciples were called Christians first.

*We are grateful, Lord, for those who encourage us as Christians. Amen.*

*DEVOTIONAL*

January 29 – February 3

Barnabas’ *Witness*

**Thursday, February 1 Acts 11:27-30**

*“A Gift to Jerusalem”*

The message brought by the group from Jerusalem involved the use of prophecy, a gift of the Holy Spirit that has a fairly prominent place in Acts and Paul’s letters. Prophecies took the form of understandable messages in the speaker’s ordinary language (unlike the gift of tongues) given by a revelation of the Spirit. Often, as here, prophecy involved prediction of future events. That this young church gave a gift to the “mother church” in Jerusalem shows how the spirit of generosity had caught on in the church.

The Jerusalem church sent the gospel to Antioch and followed it up with leaders to help them grow in their faith. Learning of the need in the Jerusalem church, the Antioch church sent financial support. The result was partnership in missions, where each church contributed to the other out of its economic, cultural, intellectual, or spiritual riches. As we will see as we move through the Book of Acts, the Antioch church would soon become a primary missionary station for the gospel going out into the Gentile world.

*When churches are mutually supportive, Lord, ministry multiplies. Amen.*

**Friday, February 2 Acts 12:1-19**

*“The church prayed earnestly for him”*

Whatever experiences God’s providence permits us to go through, our primary commitment should be to obedience. All the threats from the authorities did not cause the early church to pull back on its commitment to proclaiming the gospel. Peter saw wonderful deliverance through the intervention of God, while James faced death for Christ. But the early Christians persevered in obedience, knowing that the sovereign God would use their obedience to win a great victory for the kingdom. Earlier in Acts we learned that Stephen’s death led to the growth of the church through the scattering of the seed of the word. But in James’ case we see no obvious evidence of triumph. God may reserve that revelation until we get to heaven.

A constant refrain in Acts is that through all of the triumphs and seeming tragedies of life the word of God continues to spread. This growth has gone on unabated. The gospel, which had such small beginnings in the first century, has now spread to the ends of the earth. And it will continue to spread until Christ returns.

*May we remain obedient to you, Lord, continuing to spread your word. Amen.*

**Saturday, February 3 Acts 12:20-25**

*“Now Herod was very angry”*

Herod had lost a chance to further please the Jews, and his reaction to Peter’s escape was so violent that he killed the guards who had been stationed to assure that he did not get out of the evil king’s grasp (see yesterday’s devotion). However, his deflated ego received a big boost at his conference with the desperate delegates from Tyre and Sidon, who, deprived of their food supply, resort to flattery to win him over. Responding to the king’s speech, they proclaim, “The voice of a god and not a man.” This was what the king wanted to hear. Since his boyhood days with his friend Caligula in Rome, he wanted the god-like power of the Caesars. But, Caligula went mad and Herod was eaten by worms. So much for visions of grandeur.

Immediately after the report of Herod’s death Luke gives a report of the growth of the church he had brutally tried to suppress. Verse 24 ends the description in Acts of the Christian mission to the Jewish world. From the next verse to the end of Acts, the focus will be on Paul and his missionary activity to the Gentiles.

*The arrogant will be brought low, Lord, and the humble exalted. Amen.*