

We all like a good story. So, let's listen to Jesus tell one. It may be new to you, *or* quite familiar. We came across it in our study of Luke's Gospel, * beginning in chapter 8, verse 4:

Read Luke 8:4-8

* ⁴ **When a large crowd was coming together, and those from the various cities were journeying to Him, He spoke by way of a parable: ⁵ "The sower went out to sow his seed; and as he sowed, some fell beside the road, and it was trampled under foot and the birds of the air ate it up. ⁶ "Other seed fell on rocky soil, and as soon as it grew up, it withered away, because it had no moisture. ⁷ "Other seed fell among the thorns; and the thorns grew up with it and choked it out. ⁸ "Other seed fell into the good soil, and grew up, and produced a crop a hundred times as great." As He said these things, He would call out, "He who has ears to hear, let him hear."**

Everyone in Jesus' audience could relate to the story since sowing seed was a familiar sight, especially in the fall, to take advantage of the winter rains. A farmer would sling a bag of seed over shoulder, and cast the seed as he walked. It wasn't a precise method, but it got the job done, dispersing seed widely in hopes of germination, and eventually, a bountiful harvest.

The seed sown by this farmer fell on four kinds of soil. Some fell on the hard **road** along his property. It had no chance of penetrating this packed soil, and was eaten by birds.

Some seed fell on **rocky**, shallow soil. On the surface there was enough soil for the seed to sprout, but underneath was impenetrable rock, which kept the roots from going deep, causing the sprout to die in heart of the sun.

Some seed fell on ground with thorny weeds – with the weeds winning out over the seeds in the battle for life-sustaining water and nutrients. So far, no good.

But, some seed landed on **good**, rich, deep, tilled **soil**, free of rocks and weeds. While no crop came from the other seeds, those that fell on *this* soil produced a bountiful crop – five to ten times more than expected.

Jesus concludes the story by saying...

Read v.8b

... "He who has ears to hear, let him hear"

Unsure of the point of the story, we read...

Read Luke 8:11-15

⁹ **His disciples began questioning Him as to what this parable meant. ¹⁰ And He said, "To you it has been granted to know the mysteries of the kingdom of God, but to the rest it is in parables, so that [then quotes from Isaiah 6:9] SEEING THEY MAY NOT SEE, AND HEARING THEY MAY NOT UNDERSTAND.**

Jesus had been teaching people about God's kingdom, how to be part of it, and how to live accordingly. While His disciples were beginning to understand it, not everyone would. People were as different as the soils in the parable.

Read Luke 8:11-15

* ¹¹ **"Now the parable is this: the seed is the word of God. * ¹² "Those beside the road are those who have heard; then the devil comes and takes away the word from their heart, so that they will not believe and be saved. ¹³ "Those on the rocky soil are those who, when they hear, receive the word with joy; and these have no *firm* root; they believe for a while, and in time of temptation fall away. ¹⁴ "The seed which fell among the thorns, these are the ones who have heard, and as they go on their way they are choked with worries and riches and pleasures of *this* life, and bring no fruit to maturity. ¹⁵ "But the seed in the good soil, these are the ones who have heard the word in an honest and good heart, and hold it fast, and bear fruit with perseverance.**

Jesus doesn't identify the sower in this story, but certainly His disciples would think of Jesus as being the sower – the One who spoke divine truth – a message from God. They'd heard Him speak about God's Kingdom, about death and life, sin and salvation, judgment and blessing. They'd heard Him speak about believing in Him and following Him. Jesus was constantly sowing the seed of God's Word to individuals *and* multitudes alike.

His message – God's word – was powerful and life changing – to those whose hearts were receptive of the truth. Divine truth is Scripture is not only likened to seed, but to the rain that waters the seed:

Read Isaiah 55:10,11

* ¹⁰ **"For as the rain and the snow come down**

from heaven, And do not return there without watering the earth And making it bear and sprout, And furnishing seed to the sower and bread to the eater; ¹¹ So will My word be which goes forth from My mouth; It will not return to Me empty, Without accomplishing what I desire, And without succeeding *in the matter* for which I sent it.

It's interesting that while Jesus in the parable identifies the seed as being the word of God, and elaborates on the various types of soil, He *neither* identifies *nor* elaborates on the sower. Perhaps because the disciples would assume that Jesus was the sower. *And* perhaps because Jesus wants the focus on what's being sown more than on who's sowing it – which might help them apply this truth to their own lives and ministries when they themselves become the sowers of the seed of the gospel. And we've been witnessing His followers doing just that in Acts. He was both giving them confidence in the power of God's word, while at the same time preparing them for varied responses to it.

With that in mind...

[Turn to Acts 11]

The followers of Jesus have been majoring on the sowing of the seed – the sharing of God's Word – whether it be the gospel that implants life, or the ongoing that leads to ongoing growth.

* There's a pattern developing in the Book of Acts – a pattern of life, growth, and fruitfulness – a pattern of evangelism (sowing the seeds of the gospel resulting in the spouting of life in Jesus), edification (growing up in Jesus), and service (serving Jesus and others). And we began to notice last week, that pattern was beginning in Antioch. Remember? It started with the sowing of the seeds of the good news about Jesus:

Read v.19

* ¹⁹ **So then those who were scattered because of the persecution that occurred in connection with Stephen made their way to Phoenicia and Cyprus and Antioch, speaking the word to no one except to Jews alone.**

Unnamed believers, **scattered** because of **persecution**, brought the gospel with them to various places, including **Antioch**, the provincial capital of Syria – and the third most important city in the whole of the Roman Empire. This cosmopolitan city of a half million people was

powerfully impacted by the gospel. One of the most significant things about what was going on there was that the gospel was not only spreading among Jews, but among Gentiles as well!

Read v.20

* ²⁰ **But there were some of them, men of Cyprus and Cyrene who came to Antioch and began speaking to the Greeks also, preaching the Lord Jesus.**

Ben Witherington III (p.369) captures what's going on in these last few chapters, saying: *“Taking Acts 8-11 together, one gains the rather clear impression that Luke is presenting a complex picture of the origins of the proclamation of the good news to Gentiles. It was not a mission originated by the leadership of either the Jerusalem or Antioch church but by God through a variety of means including Peter, Paul, these anonymous men from Cyprus and Cyrene, and perhaps even Philip.”*

Gentiles are becoming a greater focus of evangelistic efforts, and not surprisingly, since Jesus told us to bring the gospel to the farthest part of the earth. And the gospel was making an impact in Antioch:

Read v.21

* ²¹ **And the hand of the Lord was with them, and a large number who believed turned to the Lord.**

What had happened earlier in and around Jerusalem, and then in Samaria, was now happening in Antioch – among Gentiles as well as Jews. **The hand of the Lord** was moving! Spiritual life spouted in Antioch. But that was only the first stage.

Read v.22

* ²² **The news about them reached the ears of the church at Jerusalem, and they sent Barnabas off to Antioch.**

When the news reached Jerusalem, the leaders there dispatched Barnabas to confirm that salvation had come to Gentiles in Antioch, *and* to encourage these new believers in their faith. Both of those objectives were met:

Read vs.23,24

* ²³ **Then when he arrived and witnessed the grace of God, he rejoiced and began to encourage them all with resolute heart to remain true to the Lord; ²⁴ for he was a good man, and full of the Holy Spirit and of faith.**

And considerable numbers were brought to the Lord.

Barnabas confirmed that indeed salvation had come, and he *began to encourage them all with resolute heart to remain true to the Lord.*

Knowing that conversion was just the start, Barnabas encourages them to wholehearted and ongoing devotion to Jesus.

God was using Barnabas to begin ushering these new believers form the first stage of the spiritual life cycle (spiritual birth, the sprouting of life), to the second stage – spiritual growth. Evangelization must be followed by edification – the building up of the new life that is formed.

That’s where we left off last week. But this morning we’ll see that the process of growth that began with the encouragement of Barnabas, didn’t end there. It continues with a little help from a friend:

Read v.25

***²⁵ And he [Barnabas] left for Tarsus to look for Saul;**

When Barnabas considered the challenge of establishing these new believers in their faith and helping them to grow, the person who came to mind to assist him was Saul of Tarsus. You remember Saul – the persecutor of Jesus followers who had a divine encounter with Jesus on his way to Damascus to round up believers to bring back to Jerusalem. Well, that encounter transformed Saul. He himself was converted – new life sprouted – and he began to grow and mature in Christ.

May followers of Jesus were skeptical of Saul’s conversion, but Barnabas (“Son of Encouragement”) befriended and helped him to gain acceptance among the followers of Jesus back in Jerusalem.

Saul left Jerusalem, and apparently returned to his hometown of Tarsus. It had now been 6-8 years since Paul was changed by his encounter with Jesus. He’d probably spent that time engaged in study, ministry, and suffering for Jesus’ sake. We have little information to go on.

But while Saul was out of Barnabas’ sight, he was not out of Barnabas’ mind. So Barnabas heads NW to Tarsus to **look for** Saul (about 100 miles by land or 80 miles by sea). The particular word translated “**look for**” often carries with it the idea of carefully searching, suggesting

perhaps that Barnabas couldn’t find him immediately, but carefully searched until he found him.

Why would Barnabas think Saul was worthy of being tracked down as the right man for Antioch? Barnabas was aware of the ministry to which Jesus had called Saul. Remember how Jesus put it in His words to Ananias?

Read 9:13-16

***¹⁵ But the Lord said to him, "Go, for he is a chosen instrument of Mine, to bear My name before the Gentiles and kings and the sons of Israel; ¹⁶ for I will show him how much he must suffer for My name's sake."**

What better person for Barnabas to have with him in Antioch – a cosmopolitan city filled both new *Jewish* believers and new *Gentile* believers – than Saul, who was specially called and gifted to minister amongst such diversity. He could relate to both Hebraic Jews and Hellenistic Gentiles.

So we read...

Read v.26a

***²⁶ and when he had found him, he brought him to Antioch.**

Barnabas brings his friend Saul with him back to Antioch. And what did they do there?

Read v.26b

***²⁶ ... And for an entire year they met with the church and taught considerable numbers; and the disciples were first called Christians in Antioch.**

Barnabas and Saul poured their lives into the considerable number of believers who were living in Antioch. They invested their time in teaching them.

What would they have taught them? The truth.! They’d have taught them about Jesus – the things Jesus *did* and the things Jesus *taught* – things He’d passed on to His original disciples, who passed it along others. They’d have instructed them about what the Old Testament taught about God and His plan – and about how Jesus was the fulfillment of that plan. They’d have taught them about the significance of Jesus’ death, resurrection, and ascension – and about the ministry of the Holy Spirit. They’d have taught them about how to live, how to love, how to pray, how to follow Jesus. They’d have taught them things people like Peter and Stephen

preached about – and things Peter and John and Saul himself would later write down – things that are a part of the New Testament record. I doubt they ran out of things to teach (time maybe, content, no).

Why is instructing people in truth so important? As Jesus prayed in the garden on the night before He was crucified:

Read John 17:17

***¹⁷ “Sanctify them in the truth; Your word is truth.”**

Truth embraced and applied transforms us. Not truth merely heard or considered. No, truth embraced and applied transforms us – sets us apart *to* God and *for* God.

Building up these believers was a major concern of the church in Jerusalem. That’s why they sent Barnabas to confirm what had taken place and to encourage them. Growing up believers was major concern for Barnabas, that’s why he sought out Saul’s help in doing so. And Saul shared that concern, which is why he joined Barnabas in pouring himself into these new believers for an entire year.

We’d be appalled if someone took a newborn baby, dropped them off in a fully furnished apartment, and said, “OK kid, you’re on your own!” No, that child needs to be nurtured, cared for, and instructed. It’s no different with newborns in Christ. Just like newborn babies need the care of loving parents, new followers of Jesus need to be nurtured and instructed in the ways of the Lord.

* And I think God used Barnabas and Saul quite effectively. I say that because these folks grew enough to bear fruit – to become effective servants of Jesus themselves. Why do I say that? There’s at least two pieces of evidence that stand out. The first in at the end of v. 26:

Read v.26c

***²⁶ ... and the disciples were first called Christians in Antioch.**

These new believers distinguished themselves among this diverse population. They were distinct even from Jews. They were known as being so devoted to Jesus that they were called **Christians** – and this is the first time Jesus followers bore that name – a name common today. They weren’t just followers of God – they were followers of His anointed Son, who is the

way and the truth and the life. They were being set apart – and the citizens of Antioch noticed.

Do people notice that about us? Do they notice that are followers of Christ? So they notice that our allegiance belongs to Him? Do they notice that we are becoming like Him?

The second piece of evidence that these believers were growing and bearing fruit is seen the verses that follow:

Read vs.27,28

²⁷ Now at this time some prophets came down from Jerusalem to Antioch. ²⁸ One of them named Agabus stood up and *began to indicate by the Spirit that there would certainly be a great famine all over the world.* [Hyperbolic language...of its widespread impact on the Roman Empire] **And this took place in the reign of Claudius.*

God used a Spirit-empowered prophet named Agabus to warn believers about a coming famine of great impact. Several periods of draught and famine impacted the reign of Emperor Claudius, who ruled from AD 41-54. Agabus is probably referring to an event in the late AD 40s. As the next verse indicates, the impact on Judea – the area around Jerusalem – was great.

Notice how the Christians in Antioch responded to the situation:

Read vs.29,30

***²⁹ And in the proportion that any of the disciples had means, each of them determined to send a contribution for the relief of the brethren living in Judea. ³⁰ And this they did, sending it in charge of Barnabas and Saul to the elders.**

They not only **determined to send a contribution for the relief of the brethren living in Judea** – they actually **did** send a generous contribution to the elders in Jerusalem, through their trusted mentors, **Barnabas and Saul**. They didn’t just engage in cheap talk.

Luke points out that they gave **in the proportion that any of the disciples had means**. They gave in accordance with their means. On Wednesday nights, in our study of II Corinthians, we’ve been noticing that Paul stressed that same principle in challenging the Corinthian to give the needy saints in Jerusalem on another occasion. God’s generosity toward us

should be reflected in our generosity toward others.

As you may recall from earlier chapters in Acts, Barnabas, the mentor of the believers in Antioch, expressed his maturity and love for others in that very same way. It looks like these little apples Antioch are not falling far from the tree of their mentor.

Yes, these believing were progressing from new life, to growth, to bearing fruit. And all the while God was working through His Word and through others believers. Some things never change. God continues to work the same way.

There's so much more we can say, but let me close with two observations:

1. Notice that what's happening in Antioch (a church with many Gentiles) was mirroring what had happened in Jerusalem (a church comprised of Jews).

In Jerusalem, God used people like Peter and John who sowed the seeds of the gospel. The gospel took root, and new life began for thousands of people. Then He used the ongoing teaching ministry of the Apostles – teaching to which the early believers were devoted – to help them grow *and* mature *and* bear fruit. And among the evidence that they were growing and bearing fruit was the generosity that characterized them (chapters 2,4,6). This was going on amongst Jewish followers of Jesus.

Did you notice the same pattern repeated among Gentiles? In Antioch, God used unnamed believers to sow the seeds of the gospel, and new life began for many. Then He used the teaching of Barnabas and Saul to help them grow *and* mature *and* bear fruit. And among the evidence of their maturity was their generosity – to the very people from whom the gospel came to them. You can't make this stuff up. As Darrell Bock notes (p.411):

“The Jews brought salvation to the Gentiles, and the Gentiles reciprocated by bringing material support to the Jews.”

2. Notice how God had used Saul in what's going on in Antioch. God used Saul the antagonist the start the church, and Saul the Apostle to bring it to maturity.

Remember how God brought about the beginnings of the church in Antioch?

Read 8:3-5

***³ But Saul began ravaging the church, entering house after house, and dragging off men and women, he would put them in prison. ⁴ Therefore, those who had been scattered went about preaching the word. ⁵ Philip went down to the city of Samaria and began proclaiming Christ to them.**

But Philip wasn't the only one scattered sowing the seeds of the gospel as a result of Saul's persecution. Remember how Luke picked up that theme in 11:19,20?

Read v.19

***¹⁹ So then those who were scattered because of the persecution that occurred in connection with Stephen made their way to Phoenicia and Cyprus and Antioch, speaking the word to no one except to Jews alone. ²⁰ But there were some of them, men of Cyprus and Cyrene who came to Antioch and began speaking to the Greeks also, preaching the Lord Jesus.**

Saul's persecution also scattered unnamed believers who brought the gospel to Antioch. And then, whom does God use to bring to maturity the kind of people Saul had once sought to eradicate?

Read vs.25,26

***²⁵ And he left for Tarsus to look for Saul; ²⁶ and when he had found him, he brought him to Antioch. And for an entire year they met with the church and taught considerable numbers; and the disciples were first called Christians in Antioch.**

You can't make this stuff up. God once again demonstrates that His hand is at work. Is He at work in your life? Have you come to place your faith in Jesus as Savior and Lord – the One who rescues from death and futility, so you can experience life and purpose? He did that for many in Jerusalem. He did that for many in Antioch. And He wants to do the same for you today.