Barnabas Encourages Christians in Antioch

Acts 11:19-26

BIBLE BACKGROUND FOR LEADERS

Reason to Praise

In the chapters leading up to today's passage, God revealed to Peter that the message of Christ is not only for Jews but for non-Jews as well. Peter then took that message to the household of Cornelius, a Roman centurion, and God poured out the Holy Spirit on these non-Jews who then came to faith in Christ. The Jerusalem church had a hard time accepting that non-Jews could become believers in Christ, but after Peter explained everything that had happened, they praised God that he had granted even the Gentiles eternal life through Jesus (Acts 10:1–11:18).

Reason to Scatter

In today's passage, we see that the early followers of Christ had been scattered from Jerusalem because of the persecution that began after Stephen was killed. The Jews had stoned him after he accused them of killing the Messiah, Jesus. But everywhere the scattered followers went, they told people about Jesus (Acts 7:1–8:4).

Spreading the News

The believers who were scattered to Antioch, at that time the third largest city in the Roman Empire, began sharing the message of Christ not only with the many Jews who lived there, but also with the non-Jews. When Jerusalem's church heard that a great number of people had turned to the Lord, they were ready to accept these non-Jewish believers, and they sent Barnabas (whose name means "Son of Encouragement") to see what was happening and to contribute to the spreading of the gospel message.

Barnabas invited Saul (whom we know as the Apostle Paul) to Antioch for a year to help teach because the church was expanding so quickly. Barnabas had befriended Saul and defended him before the apostles in Jerusalem after Saul had met Christ on the road to Damascus (Acts 9:1-30).

What happened in Antioch was significant because it was, apparently, the first time Jewish and non-Jewish Christians joined together in fellowship. People there were accustomed to rubbing shoulders with people of different backgrounds and of different ethnic groups. The church in Antioch set a wonderful example for churches to follow in centuries to come.

The Jesus Connection

As the text tells us, Jesus' followers were first called Christians in Antioch. It's significant that in Antioch this diverse group of followers took on a name that means "like Christ." As they lived out Jesus' example and encouraged others in the faith, people noticed. What a compliment it would be for others to consider us to be like Jesus!

Pray about how your life can reflect Jesus in a way that would help draw others to God. You can write your prayer here.