



WINGS AND ROOTS STRETCHING OUR HORIZONS, DEEPENING OUR ROOTS

SERIES: LIFE UNLEASHED

Acts 11:19–30

21st Message

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May 15, 2016

Two weeks ago the pastoral staff and a number of our elders went to Lake Tahoe for a week of study with Rikk Watts, professor of NT at Regent College in Vancouver. Rikk is a rare blend of Biblical scholar and charismatic preacher who adores people and is unabashedly passionate for Jesus. Rikk gave talks in the mornings on 1 Corinthians, with an emphasis on the Hellenistic culture into which Paul was speaking. This was a culture where standards of “virtue” had become tools of the elite ruling class to preserve the status quo. Learning more about this shed new light on the way Paul spoke in order to subvert and transform that culture. Rikk’s talks challenged our thinking on the way we are speaking into our own culture today. In the afternoons our attention turned from the mind to the heart when we had open time for questions and dialogue about various issues facing our church. It was an honest and vulnerable time, as none of us are feeling adequate to face many of the challenges of ministering into today’s world. It was during these sessions that Rikk shared from the depths of his heart his love for Jesus and how God’s Spirit had led him. The more he spoke, the more we longed for a fresh supply of God’s Spirit.

What would it look like if God came down and gave us a fresh outpouring of his Spirit? I would suggest two images: roots and wings. The Spanish poet Juan Ramón Jiménez writes:

Roots and wings,
but let the wings take root and the roots fly.¹

As we turn our attention back to the book of Acts, Luke gives us an example of what a Spirit filled community looks like, as he documents the birth of a new community of believers in Antioch. Richard N. Longenecker gives the background of the development of the city.

Antioch of Syria was founded about 300 B.C. by Seleucus I Nicator, who named it after either his father or his son, both of whom bore the name Antiochus. It was situated on the Orontes River about three hundred miles north of Jerusalem and twenty miles east of the Mediterranean, at the joining of the Lebanon and Taurus mountain ranges where the Orontes breaks through and flows down to the sea. To distinguish it from some fifteen other Asiatic cities built by Seleucus and also named Antioch, it was frequently called “Antioch-on-the-Orontes,” “Antioch-by-Daphne” (Daphne, the celebrated temple of Apollo, was nearby), “Antioch the Great,” “Antioch the Beautiful,” and “The Queen of the East.” During the first Christian century, it was, after Rome and Alexandria, the third largest city in the empire, having a population of more than 500,000.

First-century Antioch was a melting pot of Western and Eastern cultures, where Greek and Roman traditions mingled with Semitic, Arab, and Persian influences...The city was not only known for its sophistication and culture but also for its vices. The beautiful pleasure park of Daphne was a center for moral depravity of every kind, and the expression Daphnici mores

became a proverb for depraved living. The Roman satirist Juvenal (A.D. 60–140) aimed one of his sharpest gibes at his own decadent Rome when he said that the Orontes had flowed into the Tiber (Satirae 3.62), flooding the imperial city with the superstition and immorality of the East.²

In summary we find Antioch to be a cosmopolitan city full of gods, great wealth and sexual immorality. Not much different than San Francisco or Silicon Valley. What strategy does God employ to begin a new work in this city? A modern approach might be to rent a stadium and find a well-known charismatic evangelist to preach the gospel to the masses. But in this case, God’s methods are radically different.

I. New Wings for Outreach (Acts 11:19–21)

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. 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. And the hand of the Lord was with them, and a great number who believed turned to the Lord. (Acts 11:19–24 ESV)

The persecution that arose in connection with Stephen’s martyrdom forced many disciples to flee well beyond the borders of Judaea to the island of Cyprus and to the coastal region of Phoenicia and Antioch to the far north. These regions contained large Jewish populations. Though they were uprooted from their homes, these disciples saw their plight as an opportunity to spread the gospel into new territory. Initially they spoke only to Jews, but when they came to Antioch with its mixed population of Greeks, Macedonians, Syrians, Jews and Romans, a remarkable change occurred among those from Cyprus and Cyrene, the capital of the Roman province of Cyrenaica (Libya) in North Africa. Suddenly they began to see with new eyes that God’s Spirit trumped nationality and race, and so they crossed the bridge and preached the gospel to non-Jews as well.

Luke doesn’t tell us why this particular group was the first to catch the Spirit’s vision before the others. Was it because those from Cyrene had traveled the furthest, and perhaps like the Syrian refugees had experienced the sacred brokenness that flattens our pride and levels the playing field of our humanity? Luke has already made mention of Cyrene in his gospel, when one of her citizens named Simon was compelled by the Romans to carry Jesus’ cross (Luke 23:26). Did that sacred privilege infect Simon’s community with a passion for the lost? In Acts, the Jews from Cyrene were among those who witnessed the outpouring of the Spirit on the day of Pentecost (2:10). Now, following Philip’s example in Samaria, they become “evangelists without borders.”

Their message that Jesus is Lord was well suited to a gentile audience in whose world there were many gods and lords, and for those who had no concept of a promised “Messiah” (Christos).

Antioch was replete with scores of temples, countless shrines and statuary built to honor a plethora of pagan gods in the hope that one might guarantee salvation and immortality. Now imagine into that scene of opulent temples and lifeless idols come scores of homeless refugees (God's new temple) alive with the Holy Spirit proclaiming that Jesus is Lord. If you have ever been around broken people who have lost everything, you may have observed that when they speak, they have authenticity. So you can imagine what a powerful impact the collective testimonies of these refugees would have made to the citizens of Antioch.

Though we might feel tentative about taking on every rival deity in Antioch's pantheon, Luke tells us that their bold message (backed by the authenticity of their lives) unleashed heavens' power—"the hand of the Lord was with them and a great number of those who believed turned to the Lord." The expression "the hand of the Lord" is frequently used in Old Testament to describe Yahweh's irresistible might unleashed against his enemies in holy war. Through the preaching of these courageous refugees, God's power was unleashed from heaven and it touched down like a tornado with ravaging force, destroying every idol its wake. The result caused a great number of gentiles to turn away from their life of idolatry and turn to the one true God and Lord, Jesus (who is one and the same with the God of Israel). Though Luke has recorded the conversion of individual gentiles and Cornelius' household, the massive number of conversions in Antioch was phenomenal. As William Willimon observes, "The gospel is like a wildfire—stamp upon it in one place, it will ignite in another. Now it burns brightly with nothing to hold it back, for even the barrier between gentile and Jew has been surmounted."³

II. Deepening Roots for Nurture (11:22–26)

A. Sending an encourager to verify their faith

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, for he was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and of faith. And a great many people were added to the Lord. (vv. 22–24)

Hearing the report of what was taking place in Antioch, the leaders in Jerusalem recognized that the Spirit was taking new ground. Just as they had sent Peter and John to follow up on the evangelistic work of Philip in Samaria, so now they needed to choose an emissary to investigate what was occurring through these lay evangelists in Antioch. This is a critical moment in the life of the church and a lot is riding on the individual they choose to send. It is easy for spiritual leaders to misconstrue their role as "religious police," or worse yet, "dictators" who are responsible for regulating and monitoring everyone's spiritual life within their realm. For those who need to be in control the news of massive conversions taking place at the hands of unauthorized refugees could provoke fear and jealousy. If the apostles send a controlling leader into that environment the budding life could be curtailed, if not crushed.

Fortunately Jesus had rigorously purged the apostles of any illusions they may have entertained of being top dogs in the kingdom (Mark 10:42–45). Instead, he gave them a radically new understanding of leadership. Over and over he drilled into them that in God's kingdom transformation does not occur by coercion, but by loving example and lowly service. The fact that the apostles chose Barnabas for this important and delicate task is evidence that Jesus'

teaching paid off. Like many of the refugees who came to Antioch, Barnabas was born in Cyprus and, while they were forced to flee their homes, he voluntarily sold his property for the sake of the kingdom (Acts 4:36–36). Such generosity earned him the name, "son of encouragement," and being "full of Holy Spirit and faith," he was able to see to work of God's grace in others. So you can imagine, when Barnabas came to Antioch, his spirit was filled with joy by what he observed.

True to his name Barnabas fanned the flame of God's grace in everyone's life, encouraging missionaries and converts alike. Though they began well, soon they would be tested, and therefore they needed to put down deep roots while they could. Barnabas encouraged the community to make it their life purpose to persevere in their faith and devotion to the Lord. The New English Translation captures all the aspects of Luke's complex phrase—"to remain true to the Lord with devoted hearts." God's grace is a steady stream of life that never runs dry, but we have to be doggedly intentional (lit. "the purpose of the heart") to keep our boat in that stream.

Whenever I do pre-marital counseling, I explain to the couple that one of my requirements is that they be intentional about nurturing their romance. To help them get started I ask them to make an itinerary for a one-year honeymoon. Practically speaking, this means they must set aside one weekend each month to get away and leave all the demands of work and relatives behind. The goal is to build a museum of memories of fun, romance and adventure that will sustain them for years to come. My fee for their pre-marital counseling and performing the wedding is 12 postcards—one sent from each of their destinations. After I've received all 12 postcards, they are paid in full. Couples spend thousands of dollars on the wedding, but invest so little on their relationship after the wedding. It's not cheap to go away for a weekend (though many choose to camp and spend their weekend hiking along trails with breath-taking vistas), but the money is worth the investment. If couples aren't intentional about carving out time to nurture their relationship and keep their romance alive, it isn't long before their lives are overrun with all the demands of work, and their relationship turns into survival mode.

Our spiritual life is no different. Being a follower of Jesus means not only having the gift of the Holy Spirit, but also having our mind constantly renewed in God's word and a proper understanding of the gospel. We cannot drift. As Willimon exhorts us, "Here is a faith so strange, so against the grain of our natural inclinations, that only by careful instruction and long-term nurture can it be apprehended in the lives of those who would believe."⁴

When someone is "full of the Holy Spirit," his or her love for the Lord and others becomes contagious. Barnabas' encouragement reignited the believer's commitment to the Lord, making them even more diligent in their work of evangelism. The result was that more and more of Antioch's populace turned to the Lord.

B. Recruiting a teacher to deepen their roots

So Barnabas went to Tarsus to look for Saul, 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. (vv. 25–26)

It wasn't long before this burst of new life in Antioch became more than one leader could manage. Barnabas needed a gifted colleague to come alongside him and complement his gifts, but who? I find it instructive that he didn't immediately turn to Jerusalem for help. I suspect he was looking for an individual with a broader outlook,

who would not stifle the Spirit's work in this cosmopolitan setting, one who understood what it meant to be an outsider. Barnabas was gifted with the ability to see potential in people, and he decided he knew the just the right person—Saul of Tarsus. Even though Saul was a diamond in the rough and his radical proclamation of the gospel had incited the Jews in Jerusalem to attempt to kill him, Barnabas was willing to take a risk.

But the question remained, how to find him? Several years had passed since Saul had left Jerusalem Christian brothers had escorted him to Caesarea and then sent him by ship to his hometown of Tarsus. But Barnabas was not to be deterred and he left Antioch to search for his friend. F. F. Bruce suggests that it was not an easy task, for the verb “look for” means “to locate by search” and “is especially used of searching for human beings, with an implication of difficulty.” Bruce concludes that “Saul appears to have been disinherited for his Christian confession and could no longer be found at his ancestral home (Phil 3:8)”⁵ Can you imagine how isolated and alone Saul must have felt, having been violently persecuted by the Jews and disposed by his family as a traitor? Then suddenly, out of the blue, an old friend shows up, having travelled hundreds of miles to find him! It must have been quite an emotional reunion. All it takes to succeed in life is to have just one person to believe in you, one who understands that the rejection and suffering you've faced are not liabilities, but assets in God's kingdom.

My good friends, Nerses and Sevan Balabanian, just returned from Lebanon after spending several weeks encouraging dedicated Christian workers who have been serving the Syrian refugees. Nerses was born in Aleppo and served as a pastor in Lebanon for 18 years, and so, like Barnabas, he had a vested interest in traveling thousands of miles to fan the flame of faith of converts and leaders alike. Though the government is dysfunctional and struggling to address the problems in the nations, he found great hope in what churches and NGO's were doing. He writes:

Both Sevan and I met with pastors and their families, school principals, teachers, social worker and youth workers and listened to them and prayed with them. In all these, I found people who did not lose hope in serving Christ and each other.

The highlight for Nerses was gathering his former band members (Nor Yerk – “new song”) from Los Angeles, Portland, Philadelphia, San Francisco, and Basel, and putting on a two-night concert to a packed house (750 each night).

Some were singing and worshipping, some were crying with tears of pain and joy, tears of remembering the past when they used to sing these songs back home in Syria...A group 19 young people came to attend this concert from Kessab, Syria. We made special arrangements with the Lebanese government to give them a 72-hour access to enter Lebanon. Some of these young people had not left the Kessab/Lattakia region for four years. We were looking forward to seeing this group. They made it to Beirut safely and had a wonderful time. Each night I saw them sitting in one area and singing along with us. Sevan and I came back blessed. I believe the rest of the Nor Yerk band feels same way.

When Barnabas and Saul returned to Antioch, they taught the church for an entire year. What a team they must have been, perfectly suited to nurture this fledgling community. As a result of their teaching and exhortation, the church became such a vibrant community that the members could not stop talking about Jesus wherever they went. The testimony to Jesus is so strong that if you

were to ask the average Antiochene on the street, “Who are these people?” the reply would be, “O, these are the people who are always talking about Christos, the Christ-people, the Christians.”⁶ “Christians” is not a name they selected for themselves; it was one the pagans used to describe the people who were always talking about the Messiah.

We need wings to fly, to stretch our horizons, and we need strong roots to be nurtured in the apostolic truth. There is one more hallmark of a Spirit filled community.

III. Generosity for the Poor—the hallmark of authentic community (11:27–30)

Now in these days prophets came down from Jerusalem to Antioch. 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). So the disciples determined, every one 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. (vv. 27–30)

The church in Antioch is planted by refugees, nurtured by gifted teachers, and is now called upon by a prophet to give aid in a crisis. A group of prophets arrive from Jerusalem and during one of their worship services, one of them stands up and announces by the Holy Spirit that a severe famine is coming over the Roman Empire. Luke adds a note that this took place during the reign of Claudius (A.D. 41-54) when there was “a succession of bad harvests and serious famines in various parts of the empire.” The Western text adds a personal touch saying, “when we were gathered together,” which suggests that Luke may have been one of the Gentiles who had been evangelized in Antioch and, as Bruce notes, “we can readily appreciate both his interest in Antioch and his enthusiasm for the Gentile mission of Christianity.”⁷

The believers in Antioch took Agabus' announcement seriously and were moved by the Spirit to take immediate action. In the time of famine they felt Palestine would be most severely impacted and, feeling a debt to their mother-church, they determined that each individual would give “according to their means.” Once the money was collected, they commissioned Paul and Barnabas to take the gift as their representatives. By sending their leaders, they are communicating not only respect for their mother-church, but also authentication by grafting Gentiles into Jewish rootstock.

Two things strike me in these verses. The first is how open the lines of communication were between churches, despite the geographical distance. Because of their conviction that Jesus is the Lord of church and that the Holy Spirit is given to all without distinction, we don't find leaders becoming territorial or possessive over their flocks. At least in the earliest stages of the church, there seems to be an openness to receive everyone's gifts both within the local assembly (1 Cor 14:26), and from those outside. When Paul opens his letter to the church in Corinth, he addresses the saints as belonging to a single worldwide community, who happen to be living in different locales.

To the church of God that is in Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints together with all those who in every place call upon the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, both their Lord and ours... (1 Cor 1:2)

Secondly, we are given an example of how the early church responded to an “earth shattering” prophetic announcement. Today

we often hear prophets of doom creating panic and fear among believers with their scenarios of apocalyptic disaster and advocating hoarding or transferring all our investments to gold in order to survive global economic collapse. But instead of asking, “How can we survive?” the Spirit within us responds, “Who can we help?” The believers in Antioch saw the impending famine not as a threat to their survival, but as an opportunity to strengthen the unity of the church in the bonds of love. They counted it a privilege to be able to give back to the mother-church in appreciation for the wealth of spiritual blessings Jerusalem had imparted to Antioch. In short, they were paying tribute to their sacred roots. Famine relief remained a constant priority throughout Paul’s ministry and the sacrificial giving of the Gentile churches became the hallmark of their authentic faith and of Paul’s apostleship. When the first Gentiles believed, their conversion was authenticated by the gift of tongues. But now the authenticity of their faith is demonstrated not by a sign, but by the reality of love and generosity. The sign that the Gentiles have the Holy Spirit is no longer the gift of tongues but their character and generosity. They not only gave their money, but they even gave their best two pastors away to missions. Willimon brings the point home with a penetrating exhortation:

We do well to ponder how Luke ends these accounts of congregational life at Antioch and Jerusalem with the mention of money. Not content to let us bask in the bright glow of successful evangelization of pagans or new church development, Acts insists that we attend to the significance of what the church does with its gold. Judas betrayed his Lord for cash (1:18). Ananias and Sapphira deceived the Holy Spirit and died because of money (5:1–11). Simon appeared a fool in trying to purchase the Holy Spirit (8:18). Later we shall see Paul and Silas jailed when they disrupt the business practices of some Philippians (16:16–24). The silversmiths of Ephesus rioted when the gospel disrupted their source of income (19:23–41). Love of money is one of the most insidious forces with which the gospel must contend. The battle between the truth of Christ and our homage to cash is relentless.⁸

The global refugee crisis we are facing in our world today brings the application close to home. I am deeply encouraged by the sacrificial support Nerses and his team gave on behalf of the Syrian refugees. We must take his words to heart.

The mission continues in Lebanon and Syria. We who live in the US cannot just stand here without doing anything. God gave me people like you who support these ministries. I thank God for your love and care for those people. We will continue praying for them and supporting them. We will continue remembering that the Kingdom of God does not have artificial borders. Christ called us to serve and I am obeying that call.

IV. Questions for reflection: Are you filled with the Spirit?

1. Are you willing to be uprooted to expand your horizon?
2. Has God been gently prodding you to “cross the line” and share the good news with foreigners within your circle?
3. How deep are your roots (Ps 1:1–3)?
4. Have you purposed in your heart to remain true to the Lord with a devoted heart?
5. Are you eager and generous to help those in need?

On the last day of our weeklong retreat with Rikk Watts, we had a special time of laying on of hands and prayer for each of our pastors and elders who came. In the end we all wanted the same thing—for God to pour out his Spirit upon us. May God by his grace give us wings and roots, and like the Spanish poet writes, “May our wings take root and the roots fly!”

1. Edward Hirsch, *How to Read a Poem and Fall in Love with Poetry* (New York: Harcourt Brace and Company, 1999), 6.
2. Richard N. Longenecker, *Acts* (EBC 9; ed. Frank E. Gaebelin and J. D. Douglas; Accordance electronic ed. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), n.p.
3. William Willimon, *Acts*, Int (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1988), 105.
4. Willimon, *Acts*, 107.
5. F. F. Bruce, *The Book of Acts* (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), 240.
6. Bruce, *Acts*, 241.
7. Bruce, *Acts*, 243.
8. Bruce, *Acts*, 243.
9. Willimon, *Acts*, 109.

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