

Called to be a Witness
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As I said earlier in the service, we're gonna get back in our regular study routine. We started a project last fall which was, as a main target of our studies for the...as a congregation, kind of a congregational core curriculum this year, was going to be taking us through the book of Acts. And that's where we've been throughout the fall months. We've been through kind of a disjointed time here over the holidays and through the fire season. But we're gonna get back into that study now, and we're gonna pick it up almost...almost ten years into the story. The book of Acts is a story of the church at its very beginning; after Jesus had been crucified, buried, rose again, and was exalted into heaven—what the church did after that. How did the church get on after Jesus was gone? And that's what we've been looking at through the book of Acts, and we're about ten years into that story.

It starts at the very beginning of Acts with Jesus giving direction to the church. And He tells the church that "You will be My witnesses. The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and you will be My witnesses in Jerusalem, and to Judea, and in Samaria, and into the uttermost parts of the earth," or to the remotest parts of the earth. Jesus said 'That's what's going to be happening, that's what you're going to do.' Ten years down the road, where we're gonna pick up the story today, that message had been going out—that witness to the reality of Jesus, which the church had been called to give, had been going out and had been spreading. They had been talking about Jesus, and that message had grown and it had multiplied. People were hearing it far beyond Jerusalem.

It began by spreading first to the east...I mean, excuse me, to the west coast, the Mediterranean coast, from Jerusalem; and then it worked its way up north to the city of Antioch. And as it spread there it wasn't really an intentional pattern. It wasn't like the church leaders in Jerusalem sat down and said, 'Here's the three steps we're gonna take to get the gospel up there, and this is the direction we're gonna go.' It was, rather, kind of an unprogrammed approach. It took a good seven or eight years...actually ten years after Jesus left...for that gospel to make it from Jerusalem to Antioch—hundreds of miles, about five-six hundred miles from Jerusalem.

It made it there, again, in kind of an unintentional way. We're told in chapter 11, near the end of chapter 11, in the book of Acts, we're told that... And I just ran into a problem. That screen's a little far for my eyes to read. So you're gonna get my 'old man eyes' and just kind of referencing the verses here. But anyway... Those who were scattered by the persecution associated with Stephen. Jerusalem...the Christians for the first couple years had been content to stay in Jerusalem and just grow as a happy church, dealin' with the challenges they had, but kind of in that one area. And then after about two years there's a persecution broke out; one of their leaders was put to death, and they were scattered. They were no longer welcome in Jerusalem. And as they were scattered they began to talk about Jesus. And they began to talk about Him in places like Phoenicia and Cyprus, and eventually all the way up to Antioch these scattered Christians went. And everywhere they went they kept talking about Jesus.

Now, when they first made it to Antioch, the ones that first made it there, they only talked to other Jews about Jesus. They were still uneasy about talking about Jesus to Gentiles, to pagans who worshipped idols and stuff like that. But there were some men, when they first came into Antioch, there were some men who had grown up in Cyprus, in Cyrene—they'd grown up in another area; and they came into Antioch, and they didn't have any problem talking to Gentiles, to Greeks, about Jesus. And so they began to talk to people—about Jesus—who were not Jews. An amazing thing happened. They began to talk about Jesus, to proclaim the Lord Jesus, and we're told that the hand of the Lord was with them. God began to work as these Jews in Antioch began to talk to non-Jews about Jesus. The Lord began to work in them, and around them, and to demonstrate His presence in their midst. And we're told that the hand of the Lord was with them, and that many of them—a large number of them—responded and became Christians.

It's a very significant point in the story of the book of Acts. Again, we're about ten years...nine to ten years after Jesus had left. And this is a very significant time. For one, Antioch was a strategic city. And once the gospel took hold there, it would spread rapidly across the whole Roman Empire. Antioch was the third largest city in the Roman Empire. It was called the Queen of the East among the cities. It was on the major trade routes; it was a political center; it was an economic center. There were people from all over the Roman Empire there, from all different nationalities, from the east, from the west, from the north, from the south. And as the gospel took hold there it began to spread.

While it was in Jerusalem, it was like in a little cul-de-sac, a little religious cul-de-sac. But when it'd been scattered under the persecution and it finally made its way to Antioch, it just exploded out into the Roman Empire. And the rapid movement from here is just astounding as the gospel spreads.

Not only is it strategic; it is also the city, the first place, where we have a large number of non-Jews becoming Christians, a large number of Gentiles become Christians. And you actually have a whole church there that is born that is predominantly non-Jewish in heritage, predominantly Gentile. And it's the first time that happens, which is gonna make it much easier for the gospel to spread; not just because of strategic, geographical location; but finally it was beginning to spread into other ethnic groups.

And the other thing that was significant when you're in this Antioch church—not only is it ready, now, to explode and ready to move out across the whole empire. Another thing that happens is that Rome, in the Antioch church, is gonna have such a good example of how this gospel changed people. It's what I love about the story of Antioch. We're told that these Gentiles...that when they became Christians, and there's this large number of Christians there, and the Jerusalem church heard about it, they sent a man named Barnabas up. And they said, 'You go up and check that out.' And he went up there; he was so overjoyed. It says he saw the grace of the Lord, he saw these people responding to Jesus, and he rejoiced. And with a resolute heart—in other words, with determination—he began to encourage them. And he went and got another individual, Saul of Tarsus, to come and help him. We've met him before. And they spend a year teaching and instructing in this church of Antioch, getting it established. And so it's becoming a group of strong, healthy believers.

And during that time, as they're working with this church, some prophets—Christian prophets—come from Jerusalem. And they come to Antioch, and they begin to say, 'We have a message from God for this church.' Now these were Christians of Jewish heritage who were coming and saying, 'We have a message from God,' and their message...one particular one of the prophets, a man by the name of Agabus, stood up and he said...he said, 'There is going to be certainly, most certainly, there is going to be a great famine. A great famine is coming.' And eventually one did come, and it would grip Israel, it would grip Judea in a vise-like grip. It was a series of droughts across the Roman Empire, and crop failures. And the area...one of the hardest-hit areas was the area of Judea. But when these Christians in Antioch, these Gentiles, heard from this Jewish church down in Jerusalem that there was a famine coming, I'm intrigued by their response. We're told in the verses that follow, when they heard this prophecy and they recognized that this is what's gonna happen, most certainly this is gonna happen, we're told that they determined to send a contribution to the relief of their brethren in Judea. And that's what they did. They took a special offering; they put together a special donation, a contribution of relief; they sent it down there with Barnabas and with Paul, and they said, 'Go down there and help our brothers.'

Now, you kinda read it, and you're thinkin' 'That's kinda neat.' People, that's one of the greatest miracles in the book of Acts! You need to understand—Gentiles and Jews did not help each other. Gentiles and Jews hated each other! The Gentile didn't go out of his way to help starving Jews. And Jews didn't go out of their way to help Gentiles. But in Antioch we have a group of Gentile churches, Christians hear about Jewish Christians that are headed into a famine, and they send relief. That didn't happen in that day. But it happened in Antioch because of the transformation that came when the people believed in the reality of Jesus Christ. The gospel was spreading. It was multiplying. It would reach a strategic point, and everywhere it went it was changing people—taking people that hated each other and weaving together in caring relationships.

It did this in the face of resistance, constant resistance. In fact, even while this is taking place in Jerusalem, while the donations are putting together, and everything else, there's other things going on in Jerusalem. And what we're told that is in Jerusalem as Antioch is getting ready to send aid and help and assistance, and this church is taking root there, there's a whole 'nother problem different than famine that's facing that church in Jerusalem. The king, Herod, who's a...the uncle of the king that had put Jesus to death...the king, Herod, had decided he was going to mistreat Christians. For some reason, don't know why it was, he just got it in his head that, 'I'm gonna be rough on these Christians in Jerusalem.' And so he began to attack them and mistreat them.

One of the first things he did was he arrested one of the apostles. And up to this point they'd been pretty careful about dealing with apostles in Jerusalem. These were men that, man, they worked some amazing miracles and stuff. So the authorities were a little cautious about them. But he arrested him; and not only did he arrest him—he put him to death with the sword. The Jewish synagogue and community in Jerusalem liked that. They approved of it; it pleased them, the text says. And so Herod decided, 'I'm gonna do more of this. The church is still here. We tried to get rid of it; it's still here. I've attacked it; I've put it...one of their leaders to death, and the Jewish community loves that, so I'm goin' after these other Jewish Christians. I'm gonna put every Christian...'

He arrests Peter. And he decides he's gonna put Peter to death. And you have to picture this. This is an amazing story of intervention as we go forward. Peter is put under arrest, and they've dealt with Peter before. They know it's really tough to hold onto Peter. God seems to keep intervening. And so they put him between two guards; constant, round the clock, he's got two guards chained to him. Then they post two guards at the door, and then past that there is an iron locked gate. And he is twenty-four hours like that. And Herod's plan is to eventually bring him out and put him to death, just like he did with James, the brother of John.

But we're told the night, the very night before Herod was gonna take Peter and put him to death, we're told that suddenly in the middle of the night an angel comes and he wakes Peter up. And it's kind of interesting when you read the story, because it wasn't just kinda, "Wake up, Peter." It says it struck him. Ok? And then it told him, 'Get up! Get dressed!' and all this. And the two guards...the chains fall off and the guards stay asleep. And the angel starts walkin' Peter out, and he walks by and the two other guards are sound asleep. And they come up to the iron gate and it just opens. And Peter's out in the street, walkin' down the street with an angel, and then the angel just disappears. And we're told that then Peter realizes that this isn't a dream.

And now the story...I love this part of the story, so I'm gonna...I'm gonna actually read this, 'cause you gotta picture this. Peter goes to the place where Christians had been praying for him. And they had been praying fervently for him once he was under arrest. And he comes to that place. It says that when he realized that this was not a dream,

...he went to the house of Mary, the mother of John who was also called Mark, where many were gathered together and were praying. And he knocked at the door of the gate, and a servant girl named Rhoda came to answer. And when she recognized Peter's voice, because of her joy she did not open the gate, but she ran and announced that Peter was standing in front of the gate.

In other words, she goes, she recognizes Peter, recognizes his voice, but she doesn't open the door! She goes runnin' back to where everybody else is prayin' and she tells them...and we'll pick it up at verse 15...she announces it and they say to her, verse 15 of chapter 12,

"You are out of your mind!" But she kept insisting that it was so. And they kept saying, "It's his angel."

Some people believed, back then, that guardian angels could look like you; and that's what they thought maybe was goin' on here. "But"...I just love this...

Peter continued knocking; and when they had opened the door, they saw him and they were amazed.

And he has to motion to 'em "Be quiet," and then he tells 'em what happened, and then he moves on, and they go to tell others in the church. One commentator says, "You know, this reads like slapstick comedy." Actually, it reads like reality. God moves, and people are just totally astounded about what all's goin' on. But that the way things were. They were constantly meeting up against resistance.

Now, in this particular case, not only is Peter let loose—Herod is dealt with. We're told that he's angry at this, very angry, very upset. And he has the guards executed. And then he goes off kinda to pout in another palace that he had in Palestine. And there are some others that come to visit him there, and they're concerned because he's mad at the people that live in Tyre and Sidon and some other places. And they need food from him. So they come and they meet with them. And we're told he schedules a special meeting. And at this special meeting these people, trying to flatter him, trying to make sure they're in good grace with him, when King Herod comes out they start shouting, 'You're like a god to us! You're not a man; you're a god!' It said that he accepted that kind of worship. And God took issue with that.

We're told in the text that eventually God struck him with an angel...I mean, an angel struck him. And immediately...suddenly an angel of the Lord struck him, and he was eaten by worms and he died. Now, we kinda read that and say, 'That's a strange story.' Interesting thing...there's a Jewish historian who's not a Christian at all, who writes about this incident. He gives more detail than the text does. He describes the situation as one in which, the way the things were, the arrangement was at Caesarea when he walked into the amphitheater that he walked into, he was wearing silver clothes. And the way that he had planned this...so the sun was shining, he was entering in these silver clothes, in these silver garments, and it shone off of him, and Herod looked amazingly resplendent and light just flashed and glittered off him. And the people really did start shouting, 'He's a god! He's a god!'

And then Josephus goes on to tell how he was suddenly seized with...he had kind of a strange omen, and then he went home and he was seized by some horrible pain in his stomach; and five days later he was dead. The Bible says it was probably some parasite that burst within him. And there's medical analogies that fit well.

The one who tried to stop the gospel was dead. And we're told the gospel kept going forward.

That's what the first ten years were like, the first ten years of this gospel story. We're gonna pick it up next week and move forward. But I want you to have a sense of those first ten years. The gospel just kept moving forward.

How should that affect us as we read on in Acts? I'm gonna say two things. When you read these first ten years of this story, the first thing that should come upon you is that you know, we need to take our witness serious. We need to be very serious about our witness as Christians. See, it's our calling. At the very start Jesus called us to be witnesses. I'm not talkin' about preachers; I'm not talkin' about theologians; I'm not talkin' about being an evangelist. I'm talking about simply giving witness to the reality of Jesus Christ. That is our calling as a church—any time, any place, anywhere—that is the mission we've been given. Give witness to the reality of Jesus. That is our calling, and it is a significant calling. The Bible says that people cannot come to faith unless they hear about Jesus. Paul said it later in the book of Romans. He says faith, that faith that transforms us, that faith that can take a Jewish idol-worshipper and a religious Jew and unite them as brothers in a new thing called the church—that faith that can do that only comes when you hear about Jesus. That's the only thing that'll awaken that sort of transforming faith. It's a serious calling; it's a significant one. It is not a game.

James was put to death. I mean, we get excited about Peter walking away from the angels...with the angel. James didn't do that. He was put to death. In the battle of good against evil this is center ground, and God will not give it up. The witness of Jesus will be given, no matter the cost. And we're called to give that witness. We need to take our witness seriously—any condition, any circumstance, we're called to give witness.

But I also want us to be confident about our witness. The statement "You will be My witnesses. The Holy Spirit will come upon you and you will be My witnesses,"—that isn't just a call; that's a statement of fact. It's a statement of fact. If you acknowledge Jesus as your Lord, and the Spirit of God has entered into your life, statement of fact—you will give witness to the reality of Jesus. You will. You say, 'Wait a minute. I don't have the right words. I haven't been trained. I haven't gone through any training. I am not a theologian, Larry. I don't...I, I, I...I don't know...I'm scared to death to knock on doors.' *You will be a witness.* I don't know when, I don't know where, I don't know how, but you will be.

Four Saturdays ago I'm standing in the cold, and I'm wearing a coat that just stinks of charred smoke. I'm groggy; I can't even see straight. I've slept maybe two hours in about thirty-six hours. And I've got a news reporter with a mike in my face, and a camera right there, asking me questions that are goin' out across the nation. And I'm talking about Jesus. I didn't plan that. I didn't organize that. I didn't schedule that. I didn't prepare for that. I mean, I'm a person that has to have outlines and PowerPoint! I remember driving home that night and I had to chuckle. I just...the thought...it just...for some reason the Lord brought back a memory that had been long, long, long forgotten. It was my first serious attempt at being a witness.

I was a teenager. Our church decided that they were going to start a witnessing program, and we were drafted. And they got us together, and we all met at a building, and we were all given inventories and questionnaires to take out; and we went out to knock on doors. And we were gonna knock on doors, and people would come to the door, and we'd say, "We have a questionnaire we'd like to ask you. We'd like to take a little inventory. Would you answer some questions?" And we were taught that, you know, you get down to about question three, and if they answer this certain way, boy, start talkin' about Jesus. And I made it to about three doors. And I told my buddy that was with me, "We're done." I took those papers and I dropped them in a garbage can; hung out for a while, waited for a while; then went back to the meeting...a failed witness. Now, I didn't admit it. On through high school, on through seminary, every time somebody tried to organize a witnessing outreach and they put me in it, I failed that bad. To the point that you begin to feel you're the remedial witness.

Listen...you can run, but you can't hide. You will be a witness. And the neat thing about it—when Jesus puts it together, when it's not somebody telling you 'You have to do it and here's the form; get on it,'—when Jesus puts it together it feels right. It feels like you're doing what you've been called to do. It feels like you're doing what you've been made to do. That's not a challenge. It's not an invitation. It's not even motivational. I'm just stating a fact. You will give witness to the reality of Jesus. The Spirit's in you and moving through you, and that will happen.

Go in His grace. Amen.