

“The first people known as Christians”

Acts 11:19-26 NIV

“Now those who had been scattered by the persecution that broke out when Stephen was killed traveled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus and Antioch, spreading the word only among Jews. ²⁰ Some of them, however, men from Cyprus and Cyrene, went to Antioch and began to speak to Greeks also, telling them the good news about the Lord Jesus. ²¹ The Lord’s hand was with them, and a great number of people believed and turned to the Lord.

“²² News of this reached the church in Jerusalem, and they sent Barnabas to Antioch. ²³ When he arrived and saw what the grace of God had done, he was glad and encouraged them all to remain true to the Lord with all their hearts. ²⁴ He was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and faith, and a great number of people were brought to the Lord.

“²⁵ Then Barnabas went to Tarsus to look for Saul, ²⁶ and when he found him, he brought him to Antioch. So for a whole year Barnabas and Saul met with the church and taught great numbers of people. “The disciples were called Christians first at Antioch.

Many assume that persecuted churches can’t thrive.

Only when conditions are favorable, can they witness for Jesus and succeed.



map adapted from ccel.org

Legend

- Jerusalem
- Phoenicia
- Antioch of Syria
- Tarsus
- Island of Cyprus
- Cyrene, North Africa
- Athens, Greece
- Alexandria, Egypt

If it were illegal to honor Christ, and we’d received death threats for meeting, would you give up on Jesus and his church?

In Acts 6 & 7, we learned that Jerusalem leaders killed Stephen for preaching about Jesus.

That began a great harassment against Jesus’ church.

Believers didn’t stop believing or quit worshiping God, they just moved to other areas telling Jesus’ good news.

Sharing that Good News was more important than their homes and a settled life or staying with fellow believers in their home church.

1. Persecuted church people spread God’s Word in every direction.

Our map shows where those believers fled:

- **By land north to Phoenicia, which would include the cities of Tyre and Sidon;**
- **Also to Antioch, the world’s third largest city then— population about 500, 000;**
 - A grand boulevard (corso) ran for nearly five miles from east to west “adorned with trees, colonnades, and statues.”¹
- **By sea, some believers went to the Island of Cypress.**
 - At first, those persecuted, scattered believers witnessed only to Jews, who’d been influenced by Greek culture.



Antioch’s grand corso probably resembled this one excavated at Ephesus. Photo from Wikipedia

- Next, disciples of Jesus from Cyprus and Cyrene went to Antioch and began telling Jesus’ Good News to Greek speaking people of all backgrounds.

Why all this to do about Greek language?

Greek culture and language strongly influenced much of the Mediterranean area.

Jesus spent considerable time preaching and performing miracles in Phoenicia and in the Decapolis, areas dominated by Greek culture. This was part of God’s remarkable plan.

Romans 5:6 (NIV):

“You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly.”

The word *time* here doesn’t refer to clock or calendar time, although they might be factors.

¹ *New Commentary on Acts of the Apostles*, J.W. McGarvey, Eugene S. Smith Publishers, Des Moines, IA, Vol. 1, pp. 226

In Romans 5:6, *time* refers to the appropriate moment, not chronological time.

I proposed to Norma one afternoon after we visited her father at a Portland hospital.

Had I proposed that morning or at midnight, I think she would have reacted positively.

But there were times in the two-plus prior years I courted her when I

know she wouldn't have accepted that engagement ring she still wears.



Display only;
not Norma's

The proposal had to come at a proper moment.

God knew the appropriate timing for Jesus' ministry, his death, and resurrection.

These conditions that helped make the time right:

- **One government (the Romans) controlled most of the known world.**
People didn't need passports and didn't worry about crossing borders.
- **The multitude of meaningless religions and fear of death caused widespread despair.**
- **A language many people understood.**
A few hundred years prior to Jesus, Alexander the Great conquered much of the known world.
Alexander and his generals effectively promoted Greek language and culture.

Business people widely used Greek in their transactions; it became the language of trade.

"At just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly."

Speaking the Greek language, scattered-persecuted believers spread God's Word in every direction; the *New Testament* was originally written in Greek.

A second significant factor that modern Christians tend to overlook came into play.

2. Humility accomplishes powerful work.

Word of powerful mission efforts by these Greek speaking folks came to the attention of the Apostles and elders in Jerusalem.

Church leaders sent *Joseph* to probably first investigate and then to deal with the matter.

How many Josephs in the Bible do you recall?

If you're thinking about Joseph with the Technicolor coat you will be talking of the 11th of Jacob's 12 sons in the OT.

That Joseph died in Egypt about 1700 years before Jesus. Eliminate him from the list.

Likely everyone knows about Joseph, presumed father of Jesus, husband of Mary. Strike him from the list, too.

Remember this Acts 4: 33-37 statement about the unselfishness that distinguished early Christians:

“With great power the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus. And God’s grace was so powerfully at work in them all that there were no needy persons among them. For from time to time those who owned land or houses sold them, brought the money from the sales and put it at the apostles’ feet, and it was distributed to anyone who had need. **Joseph**, a Levite from Cyprus, whom the apostles called Barnabas (which means “son of encouragement”), sold a field he owned and brought the money and put it at the apostles’ feet.” (NIV)



Joseph was a very generous Jew from the tribe of Levi, who came from the Island of Cypress.

He sold some property and gave the entire amount of the sale to the Apostles so they could feed hungry brothers and sisters in Christ.

The Apostles gave Joseph the nickname Barnabas, which means, *son of Encouragement*. Some translations read *consolation* or *exhortation*.

When I was a ministerial student, fellow students often discussed the question:

“Other than the Lord, whom would you like to meet and talk with in heaven?”

Most students wanted to speak with Paul.
I’m not sure I ever heard anyone suggest Barnabas.

Yet I think many first century Christians

would have ranked him high on their list.

In a fascinating context, here is Barnabas again. Saul, the angry self-righteous man, who tried to destroy the church and either kill or jail believers in Jesus’ resurrection. He journeyed to Damascus, Syria to hunt down Christians there.

The risen Jesus appeared to Saul asking him why he’d been persecuting Christ. Saul believed in Jesus and was baptized for the forgiveness of his sins.

You can imagine the problem for other believers.

What if Saul was only pretending?

We see another side of Barnabas; as Luke wrote in Acts 9: 26b-30 NIV:

“They were all afraid of him, not believing that he really was a disciple. But Barnabas took him and brought him to the apostles. He told them how Saul on his journey had seen the Lord and that the Lord had spoken to him, and how in Damascus he had preached fearlessly in the name of Jesus. So Saul stayed with them and moved about freely in Jerusalem, speaking boldly in the name of the Lord. He talked and debated with the Hellenistic (Greek) Jews, but they tried to kill him. When the believers learned of this, they took him down to Caesarea and sent him off to Tarsus.”

Tarsus was Saul's birthplace and hometown.
A few years later, Barnabas became notable again.

The Antioch church grew with great numbers of Gentile believers.

The Apostles and elders in Jerusalem wanted to make sure it was according to God's will: "They sent Barnabas to Antioch. When he arrived and saw what the grace of God had done, he was glad and encouraged them all to remain true to the Lord with all their hearts." **Acts 11: 22, 23 NIV**

Acts highly praises Barnabas: "He was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and faith, and a great number of people were brought to the Lord." **v. 24**

You've probably heard ministers refer to the Holy Spirit as the *Paraclete*.

In Greek as in English, *para* means *alongside*.

A *para medic* comes to where you are and gives medical attention.

The *clete* part means "to call."

In Christ, God's Spirit promises to be alongside and with us forever.

The Greek word translated *consolation* and *encouragement* is a verb form of *Paraclete*.

Barnabas was the kind of person, who in all circumstances, literally went to be with and build up believers in Christ.



Barnabas humbly encouraged Saul again.

"Then Barnabas went to Tarsus to look for Saul, and when he found him, he brought him to Antioch. So for a whole year Barnabas and Saul met with the church and taught great numbers of people."

The word translated look indicates that Barnabas probably looked up and down lots of streets and avenues in Tarsus in order to be alongside Saul.
Why were the Antioch disciples the first to be called Christians?

This section of *Acts* centers on Greek speaking believers in Jesus, especially in Antioch.

Jewish believers in Israel claimed Jesus to be the Messiah, the anointed one.

The Greek equivalent of Messiah is Christ.
Greek speakers became known as *Christians* because they referred to Jesus as *the Christ*, not as the Messiah as Jewish believers did.

Jesus was their savior and Lord.

What labels would folks give you and me?

I pray that others know us as Christ's people, who humbly serve and lovingly proclaim hm.

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