

*A good quality snatch-strap's a mighty handy bit of kit. A snatch-strap is a big, heavy strap, made out of what looks like seat-belt webbing, but it's got some stretch built into it. And you usually use it for pulling vehicles or machinery out of the bog. The tow vehicle can get a bit of a run-up, and use its momentum, as extra force, to get the bogged vehicle moving... So the tow vehicle gets moving, it hits the end of the strap, and it stretches (it absorbs the shock)... And provided the bogged vehicle isn't **too** badly bogged, it gets going, and once it's free, it's got some catching up to do, because of the stretch, and it sort of surges forwards...*

Today's message is about "Catching up with the activity of God". You know, sometimes in our faith – sometimes in the church – sometimes in our religious beliefs, we get bogged down... But here's the thing: Even when **we** bog down, and grind to a halt, God's still going. The activity of God is still happening around us, and when God does His work, quite often we've got some catching up to do.

Last week's message was on "The value of a testimony". And something that we found, is "We tend to think of a testimony as the account of how we first came to believe in Jesus (how we became a Christian). But perhaps **equally** important, is for us to share our ongoing testimony, as we recount the amazing experiences of how we've seen God at work (answered prayer, the giving of direction, the way bible passages have spoken to you at just the right time – an experience of the Holy Spirit)...."

Testimony – even a testimony of persecution, and an unshakable faith in the midst of that persecution, is

powerful... And there's a really good example of a testimony, right here in today's reading:

It was on Easter Sunday, that we read Acts 10. And Acts 10 is about when the Apostle Peter, went to visit a gentile, Cornelius. And that just wasn't the done thing. Peter was a Jew, and Cornelius was a Gentile, and a Jew would be made unclean if he went into a Gentile's home... But God did an amazing work, to get Peter to go and do exactly that.

But then, after God had done His thing, Peter went to Jerusalem (to head office), and those who were known as "the circumcision party" got up him – they criticised him. ³ **You went to uncircumcised men and ate with them...** Oh, goodness... Wasn't Peter in trouble?

What do you do with that? I mean, Peter didn't **want** to go – "I'm not supposed to associate with the unclean" – But Peter had to catch up with God... And so God gets out His Spiritual snatch-strap, and gives Peter a great big yank. "Come on Peter, you're going to do this."

Peter had to catch up with what God was doing, and God was bringing the Gentiles into His fold... And now, "the circumcision party" at head office, were lagging way behind, and they had some catching up to do. And to help them catch up, Peter shared his testimony. You know, often, what God does to bring **you** closer to Him, if you tell somebody else about it, it will serve to bring **them** closer to God.

So, what was Peter's testimony?

- God gave him a vision (actually He replayed it to him 3 times).
- And God spoke to him in the vision "9... What God has made clean, do not call common"
- And then a coincidence that is beyond coincidence happened (It's what I call a God incidence). ¹¹ at that very moment three men arrived at the house in which we were, sent to me from Caesarea. ¹² And the Spirit told me to go with them, making no distinction. ... And so he went.

You know my experience has been, when God is trying to get us to move – and things that you would sometimes put down to “coincidence” happen, it's not a coincidence at all – it's a God-incidence. And so all of a sudden, it's a time to pray, “Lord, I don't think that was a coincidence. Are you saying to me? Lord, show me what you are doing.”

And so, Peter went.

- And he didn't go on his own – he went with witnesses
- And this is where he got some more confirmation. While God was working on Peter, an angel had visited **Cornelius**, and told him to go and find Peter at such-and-such-a place (that's why these blokes turned up there in the first place).
- And then when Peter began to preach the gospel to them, the Holy Spirit came upon the gentiles, just as He had on the first disciples, back in Acts 2.

Wow. God had done all this. He had prepared it. He'd given Peter a tug – “Come on Peter”, Peter had been obedient, and now he was seeing the fruit of that obedience, and he was able

to testify to the amazing work that God was doing... The Lord had taken the gift of Christ, out of the limited domain of Israel, and had opened the way for Christ to be received by the whole world... This was no small matter.

And **that** was Peter's testimony, and well, what could the tough guys at head office do with that??? - hit the end of the strap, and get yanked along as well. ¹⁸ **When they heard these things they fell silent. And they glorified God, saying, "Then to the Gentiles also God has granted repentance that leads to life."**

OK!! So, for **now**, they were convinced, "God is doing it – we'd better catch up"... These blokes (by the way), would become an ongoing problem for the church. They constantly lagged behind the enormity of God's grace, and we can see that coming out in some of Paul's letters.

But for now, through Peter's testimony, they were caught up.

The second story of catching up with God, was what happened at the church in Antioch.

Today (as always), a lot of faithful Christians dream of revival. Is that right? We pray for revival. We long for the Holy Spirit to sweep through our district, so that men and women, boys and girls, would turn their hearts to the Lord.

And it's a very common feeling, or thought process, "*If only we could get just the right man for the job*". "*If only a well-known Christian leader would turn up here, **then** we'd see the*

*church grow” “If only a young, vital, enthusiastic preacher would come to **our** church (instead of those other mega-churches where they seem to end up), then wow!!!, wouldn't our church grow.*

Have you ever found yourself feeling that? Maybe you've gone away to a camp and heard a brilliant speaker. Or maybe you've visited a big city church that seems to be really alive... Maybe you've seen a church with a full time staff of 6 or 10, and then you've thought of your little tin-pot show, where the pastor's a nobody, and he has to try and work a real job, simply to pay the bills, and you've compared your experience of church, with the calibre of internationally acclaimed preachers and world class worship bands,, and you've found yourself wishing “If only”

And I suspect, that if we're honest, most of us would agree, that at some time, we've had those sorts of feelings – “If only one of the big names came to live in this town, wow!!!, wouldn't **our** church grow????”

But you know what???

It's quite often the fact, that revival comes first. It's when **ordinary** people are excited about their Lord, that revival comes. And that's what happened at Antioch.

When Christians started getting persecuted in Jerusalem, they fled. And Acts is very clear – they all fled, **except** for the Apostles... And everywhere they went, they took the Gospel with them. Un-named preachers they were. Men of Cyprus and Cyrene (in this case). And they didn't only try and tell the Jews about Jesus, but they shared Christ with the Greek-

speakers as well. And V21 gives us the secret to church growth: ²¹ **And the hand of the Lord was with them, and a great number who believed turned to the Lord.**

It wasn't the famous evangelists who grew the church – it was the Lord. ²¹... **the hand of the Lord was with them, and a great number who believed turned to the Lord.**

And when head-office in Jerusalem, heard what God was doing, through simple, ordinary men, then they had some catching up to do. Wow, God's doing stuff – we'd better send the prominent preacher in. And Barnabas turned up after it had all begun. And when **Barnabas** saw the grace of God at work, he was glad “Yeah God, your grace is amazing”... **and** he exhorted them.

You know, a lot of pastors exhaust their congregations – they tire them out. But we're supposed to exhort you.

The name “Barnabas” means ‘*son of paraklēsis*’, ‘*one who encourages, or exhorts*ⁱ’. And that's what Barnabas was – he was a real encourager – but more than what **we** think of encouraging....

We tend to think of “encouragement” as “Yeah, you're going pretty well. Just keep going as you are – you'll be right”... but “exhortation” (*paraklēsis*) can be much more than that. It is an urging, and exhortation, and that's what Barnabas did. He urged them. He prodded them on. And he did it **because** he was a good man, he was full of the Holy Spirit, and he was full of faith. **That's** why he exhorted them

He exhorted them:

- to remain **faithful** to the Lord
- with **steadfast purpose**

Let me give you an example of what exhortation might sound like:

- Never give up on God.
- Never lose your faith.
- This is so important to you...
- Jesus has given so much for us, we **must** stay faithful to Him.
- There's going to be times of persecution come, and there's going to be those who try and get you to deny your Lord... Never give in to them.
- Jesus said, ^{Matthew 10:32}..... **everyone who acknowledges me before men, I also will acknowledge before my Father who is in heaven, ³³ but whoever denies me before men, I also will deny before my Father who is in heaven.**
- You stay strong.
- Keep the faith.
- Trust in God.
- Never give up – Never waver.

That's what exhortation sounds like. And a lot of us don't like exhortation, because well, it can sound rather pushy, can't it, and somebody's trying to tell me what to do... Yep. That's what exhortation is – encouragement, but it's an urging on encouragement....

Now, he exhorted them to a “Steadfast purpose”, and that phrase is an interesting one. The NIV translates it as “with all

their hearts”²³ When he arrived and saw the evidence of the grace of God, he was glad and encouraged them all to remain true to the Lord with all their hearts.

The ESV translates it as : and he exhorted them all to remain faithful to the Lord with steadfast purpose.

The NRSV says he exhorted them all to remain faithful to the Lord with steadfast devotion

The Greek actually says with the καρδίας προθέσει (*kardias prothesei*), and the best I can describe it, means a public display from the heart... *Prothesei* means *display, exhibition, plan, intention*ⁱⁱ. There's something very public about it. The classical use of *prothesei*, was the lying in state, of the dead. You know what I mean – the open casket. It's really not big in our culture (probably because it's too hot here), but it's big in other countries. When somebody dies, they'll often put them on public display (in an open casket), so that loved ones can come and pay their respects, and of course, others will come and tell them they hated their guts.... And that's what the word means *prothesei* – on display...

“*My faith's a very private thing, you know...*” How often have you heard that said???? Well, that's what Barnabas was exhorting them **not** to do. Don't **hide** your faith in Jesus Christ.

You know that old kids song:

*Joy is the flag flown high from the castle of my heart
From the castle of my heart*

*From the castle of my heart
Joy is the flag flown high from the castle of my heart
For the King is in residence there*

*Let it fly in the sky
Let the whole world know
Let the whole world know
Let the whole world know
Let it fly in the sky
Let the whole world know
That the King is in residence there*

That's what he's talking about... Don't let your faith turn into a private thing – keep it out there.

And what happened? He exhorted them to remain faithful to the Lord, and to be public in their faith, and what happened???, a great many people were added to the Lord.

And when the church grew more, they brought in some more big names. Barnabas went and found his friend Paul, and brought him to Antioch, and for a whole year, they met with the church, and they taught them. There was a lot of catching up with God to be done here. All these brand new disciples of Jesus, needing to hear the teachings of Jesus.

Paul and Barnabas' role in Antioch, was to teach. Once you become a Christian, it doesn't all end there. Your journey's not complete – there begins a life-long journey of discipleship, and part of that journey is receiving teaching.

Now, there is what seems like, a little 'by the way' sentence here: **And in Antioch the disciples were first called**

Christians. Is it any wonder? From their heart, they were publically letting people know, “We are following Christ”... And so they became known as Χριστιανούς Christians.

I wonder, if we didn’t call ourselves Christians, would the people around us come up with that word themselves, to describe us, because we’re so very public about faith in Christ....

I wonder.

The passage ends with God again leading the way, only this time, the disciples get to lead on the front-foot. A prophet came to them, and told them that a famine was on its way. And so this church, being concerned for their brothers and sisters in Christ, gave generously to those who were not yet starving, but who soon would be...

So, let’s come back to our title: Catching up with the activity of God... My prayer, is that when God speaks – when God gives us a direction – when we can see the activity of God, we’d catch on to it straight away. I pray that when God does His work, that we’d be ready to catch on, and not get stuck in our old rut, but be ready to move with Him...

It’s exciting to join in with what God’s doing...

Questions???

ⁱ Wood, D.R.W. & Marshall, I. Howard, 1996. *New Bible dictionary*.

ⁱⁱ Brown, C., 1986. *New international dictionary of New Testament theology*.