

“Because God so loves the world” (John 3:16, Acts 19:20)

“For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son” (John 3:16).

“God is love” (1 John 4:16).

When you hear these words, what thoughts come into your mind? God loved me so much that he even sent his only Son Jesus to the world and to sacrifice him on the cross for our redemption. Now I’m forgiven.

Jesus received the punishment for all my sin so that I might be saved, I’m set free from the bondage of sin, and from the fear of death. He did it for me because he loved me.

Such a love we have been given.

Perhaps you may think something like this.

Love is not just a concept. It is an action, practice. We understand it by experiences. It’s personal experiences.

God loves the world. The love of God is so great. It can cover the whole universe. It is active, powerful and dynamic. So what did he do?

2 Cor 5:18-19

All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: ¹⁹ that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men's sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation.

From this week, the next four times we will study Acts in a series “The Dynamic Love Story.” We will look at Acts and learn how the Word of God spread through the world, how the love of God was recognized at different parts of the world, how the reconciliation of God was realized in the world.

Today’s topic is “Because God so Loves the World.”

1. Began as a Local Movement

At the beginning, Jesus’ ministry was just a local movement in rural provinces.

Jesus was recognized as Galilean (John 7:52). And most of his disciples were from the region of Galilee.

Galilee was known as “Galilee of the Gentiles” (Matt 4:15), the people in the area had strong accent which was easily recognized by Jews in Judea (Matt 26:73).

Jesus spent most of his time for ministry in Galilee. Especially Mark gave 10 chapters out of 16 to talk about his ministry in Galilee and Perea, which covers 3 years and 6 months. And from Cp. 11 to 16 he describes Jesus’ last 8 days in Judea and Jerusalem.

Jesus visited and ministered in Samaria and Judea, including Jerusalem. However, all four Gospels describe that in those areas, his focus was on his disciples, and most of the events are related to the rejection of Jesus and his crucifixion and resurrection.

Jesus was crucified and on the third day he was raised to life. For 40 days he proved in many ways that he had been raised from death. He appeared not only to disciples but to more than five hundred of his followers all at the same time (1 Cor 15:6). He spoke to them about God’s kingdom (Acts 1:3).

Acts 1:4-5; 8-9

On one occasion, while he was eating with them, he gave them this command: "Do not leave Jerusalem, but wait for the gift my Father promised, which you have heard me speak about. ⁵ For John baptized with water, but in a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit."

⁸ You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." ⁹ After he said this, he was taken up before their very eyes, and a cloud hid him from their sight.

On the day of Pentecost Jesus’ followers were together in one place and praying. Suddenly there was a noise from heaven like the sound of a mighty wind! And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak with tongues. When people heard this sound, they came running to see what it was all about. And they were so wondered.

Then Peter preached. At the end he said,

Acts 2:36-38; 41-42

“God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ.”

³⁷ When the people heard this, they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and the other apostles, "Brothers, what shall we do?"

³⁸ Peter replied, "Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.

⁴¹ Those who accepted his message were baptized, and about three thousand were added to their number that day. ⁴² They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.

Now the church was established at Jerusalem. They didn't do this in secret, nor were they avoiding being seen by religious leaders. Their work became known to everyone living in Jerusalem (4:16).

Then persecution started. Peter and John were caught and told not to talk about Jesus. Early Christians united their hearts, prayed together and sought after the Holy Spirit. They prayed, "Lord, enable your servants to speak your word with great boldness" (4:29). God answered their prayer and poured out the Holy Spirit on them (4:31).

"So the word of God spread. The number of disciples in Jerusalem increased rapidly" (6:7).

2. Shifted to Large Cosmopolitan Cities

Now the work of God's gospel, reconciliation has shifted from a local movement in rural provinces to Jerusalem, the major city.

Then a great persecution broke out against the church in Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria. They preached the word wherever they went (8:1; 4).

"Then the church throughout Judea, Galilee, and Samaria enjoyed a time of peace. It was strengthened; and encouraged by the Holy Spirit, it grew in numbers, living in the fear of the Lord" (9:31).

From Cp. 10 onwards, it shows that the work of God's gospel, reconciliation has shifted from Jew's communities to the large cosmopolitan cities. This shift brought the significant impact for the Word to continue to spread and grow in power.

The Word of God, the message of reconciliation reached to

- Caesarea (cp 10), the 2nd important city in Palestine next to Jerusalem.
- Antioch (cp 11), the 3rd largest city in the Roman world, after Roma and Alexandria.¹

- Athens (cp 17), it was the center of Greek culture, philosophy, and education.²

- Ephesus (cp 19), it was the capital and leading business center of the Roman province of Asia.³

Acts 19:20 says, "In this way the word of the Lord spread widely and grew in power." Acts shows that the gospel continued to spread without ceasing, to Rome, the center of Roman Empire. Because God so loves the world.

3. Transcended Barriers

God's Word, the message of reconciliation didn't just spread geographically. It transcended social, ethnic, cultural and religious barriers.

The Jerusalem church was very Jewish in nature and practice.

Their core members were Hebrew speaking Jews. There were Greek speaking Jews too. But they felt they were often being overlooked (6:1). As for food, they considered there were some impure, unclean food (10:14). It was considered sin to visit uncircumcised men and eat with them (11:2-3). They never thought God will open the way of salvation for the Gentiles, or pour out the Holy Spirit on them (10:45; 11:18). They were still in the box of Jewish tradition.

But the Word of God advanced and transcended those barriers one after another. The message of reconciliation has power to brake the barriers and unite people in Christ.

- Caesarea (cp 10)

Here God let Peter see a vision. Peter refused to eat them, saying he would never eat anything impure or unclean. God rebuked him, saying "Don't call anything impure that God has made clean." And He made him break the rule of

¹ *Life Application Study Bible*, Tyndale House Publishers, 1996, p.1716

² *Ibid.*, p.1736

³ *Ibid.*, p.1742

Jewish tradition and visit a Roman centurion, Cornelius. Because God so loves the world.

Peter visited Cornelius, a Roman centurion. And he witnessed with his own eyes that the Holy Spirit were poured out even on the Gentiles.

It is said that this was the first city to have Gentile Christians and a non-Jewish church.⁴

In the gospels, there is an article about a centurion who sent messengers to Jesus, and his servant received healing (Luke 7:2-10). And another centurion who witnessed Jesus death on the cross said, "Surely this man was the Son of God!" (Mark 15:39). We are not sure what happened to those centurions after that.

But as for Cornelius, his salvation is so clear, there is no room for doubt. The gospel didn't just reach a gentile, but it reached a centurion, man of position in the Roman empire. The Word of God, the message of reconciliation is not limited just for the poor, or marginalized people. Because God so loves the world.

- Antioch (11:19-26)

People who had been scattered by the persecution preached the gospel only to the Jews. But some of them after they came to Antioch began to speak to Greek also (11:19-20). For the Word of God, ethnic difference is not a barrier. The message of reconciliation can unite all kinds of people in Christ. Because God so loves the world.

Antioch was the center of worship for several pagan cults that promoted sexual immorality and other forms of evil common to pagan religions.⁵

The fact that the church was built here testifies that the Word of God can work, transcending those spiritual bondages and religious barriers. The message of reconciliation has the power to brake the barriers and unite people in Christ.

Antioch was also a vital commercial center, the gateway to the eastern world.⁶

The Bible doesn't record it, but it's not difficult to imagine that the Word of God was spread through the Antioch church with merchants, tradesmen to the

⁴ Ibid., p.1712

⁵ Ibid., p.1716

⁶ Ibid., p.1716

East. In those places, the Word of God also transcended the ethnic differences, spiritual bondages, and religious barriers.

"The word of God continued to increase and spread" (12:24). Because God so loves the world.

- Athens (17:16-34)

It had magnificent buildings and many gods. It was the center of Greek culture, philosophy, and education.⁷

In Athens, the result of Paul's work wasn't remarkable. But it deserves our attention that at the very center of Greek culture, philosophy, and education, in the Areopagus, among the Council of Philosophers, the Word of God was preached.

There are no cultures, ideologies or philosophies which the Word of God cannot transcend and reach. God wants to reconcile with people there too. Because God so loves the world.

- Ephesus (cp 19)

So far, starting with Jerusalem, we have been looking at the large cosmopolitan cities like Caesarea, Antioch and Athens. We were making a survey of what kind of barriers the Word of the Lord transcended and spread widely and grew in power.

In Ephesus, all these things were experienced all together. Ephesus is the city which has all these barriers all together. We will look at the city of Ephesus in more details at another time.

Here is the summary of what we have learned so far:

- the word of the God spread widely. It spread out geographically.
- the word of God grew in power. It transcended social, cultural, ethnic and religious barriers.

Because God so loves the world.

As these things are happening, there was a shift. The work of God's gospel has shifted from a local movement in rural provinces to the large cosmopolitan cities.

⁷ Ibid., p.1736

4. Shift in Self-identity

There is another important shift that took place. We must not miss it. That was the shift in disciples' awareness. Now they had a new self-identity.

They were followers of Jewish tradition. They used to be called "Followers of the way (9:2, 18:25, 19:23, 24:14;22), a sect of the Nazarenes (24:5)". Now they are called "Christians", or "Christ-ones" (11:26). That was because their lives, their actions, their words, their attitude made people think of Christ. By being called "Christians", they became objectively conscious that they are people like that. Now they are no longer people who follow Jewish tradition. And they are not just followers of Jesus. They are Christians, "Christ-ones."

This shift didn't just happen among the believers in Antioch. But this shift was common to early churches in various places. Paul called believers in various places in his letters,

To Galatians, "For all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ" (Gal 3:26-27).

To Philippians, "Your attitude [mind] should be the same as that of Christ Jesus" (Phil 2:5).

And to Corinthians, "We have the mind of Christ" (1 Cor 2:16).

And these were what they eagerly sought and prayed for, and these were their inextinguishable passion. "My dear children, for whom I am again in the pains of childbirth until Christ is formed in you," (Gal 4:9)

It was because of this shift that took place among disciples that the word of God spread widely. This shift made it possible that the message of reconciliation was demonstrated by disciples. They transcended social, cultural, ethnic and religious barriers and preached the Word. The Word of God spread geographically and grew in power. And that work never stopped, but continued.

This shift of self-image, identifying oneself with Christ is not a new idea actually. This is Jesus' strategy for mission.

Matt 9:35-38

Jesus went through all the towns and villages, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the good news of the kingdom and healing every disease and sickness. ³⁶ When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. ³⁷ Then he said to his disciples, "The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field."

Then he prayed. He prayed all night to the Lord of the harvest, the Father who sent him (Luke 6:12-13). "The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few. Father, show me what I should do. Please let me know how..."

And the answer was to choose 12 men and disciple them and train them, teach them, and multiply himself. In this way he could multiply his work, deepen it, and continue it. Through Christ they were reconciled to him and given the ministry of reconciliation. The message of reconciliation has been committed to them. As the Father had sent him, he sent his disciples (John 20:21).

And this didn't end with the 12 apostles. As we have been seeing today, the Lord's work was succeeded by early churches, it multiplied and spread widely and grew in power. Because God so loves the world.

5. The Same Dynamic

And the Lord's work, the Word of God, has reached us too. This same dynamic is at work here in our church, NLIF.

NLIF is a part of NLFOC. We have churches and church planting ministries in Indonesia, Singapore, Cambodia, Vietnam, Myanmar, Timor Leste, Malaysia, Sri Lanka and Kirgizstan. The churches started in the major cities in those countries first. And they grow and daughter churches were born in other places, even rural areas.

At NLF conference we talked about our vision, which is "To be a family of churches united in love and committed to mutual support so that together we fulfill God's Mission in Asia and beyond for His eternal glory."

New leaders have been raised up and equipped and they are carrying out the Word of God. Just this March, one family was sent to Bishkek, Kirgizstan. We believe and pray that the message of reconciliation will be demonstrated and spread widely and grow in power.

How can NLFOC do these kind of things? Because God so loves the world.

Now look at us. We came from different ethnic groups, different languages, different cultures, even different religious back grounds, and denominational back grounds. But we gather together, and have unity in diversity and harmony in difference. How can it be possible? Because God so loves the world. And we love Jesus!

Our motto is “Experiencing the Life, Changing Lives.” In this community, NLIF, we experience Jesus, who is the true life. In these experiences, our way of life is changed, we ourselves are transformed and keep growing. And through us, many more people experience Jesus, who is the true life, and their way of life and they themselves are changed. The word of God, the message of reconciliation continues to spread widely and grow in power, in us and through us. How can it be real? Because God so loves the world. And we love Jesus and love others.

For Lifenet groups and personal reflection

1) Acts 10:9-16. What thoughts and feeling Peter might have when he said the words on v.14? Where did those thoughts and feelings come from?

2) Imagine what Peter felt when he heard the words on v.15.

3) vv.34-36. For Peter what was the new conviction? What did he come to know about who God is and what He does?

4) vv.38-42. What did he witness about? What was the message he shared about?

5) vv.43-46. What was the promise of God? How was it given? How did He prove it?

6) How do you see “the Dynamic Love of God”?