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## **Snapshots of Community: An Extended Family**

### **Acts 8-10**

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Over the last couple of weeks, we have seen that people have a need to be around other people, as they've walked and processed what happened on September 11th. That really is what community is all about – walking together with other people as you go through life and handle the things that happen along the way.

As a church, we define spiritual community as “sharing our life in Christ together in intentional, authentic relationships.” Christian community is different than just being a part of a community, in the sense that it really revolves around our shared life in Christ. We have assured forgiveness. We have a common Father who has called us into His family. We have a common mission that He has given us – to love Him and to love others. We have a common destiny – that we're going to live in all of eternity with Him and enjoy Him forever. Those things, around Jesus, bring us together. We have those things in common, so we enter into relationships with other people who are also headed in the same direction, down the same path, and we experience community together.

Pastor Bryan is taking us through the book of 1 John, which gives us the spiritual principles, the theology, on which community works and on which it's built. What I'd like to do again, as I did in August, is give a biblical snapshot of another piece of community and what it actually looks like in reality.

We're going to look at another snapshot out of the book of Acts, which is one of my favorite books in all of the Bible. Acts is a historical book which records for us the actual events that took place after Jesus ascended into heaven, and how the church grew and developed. It shows us pictures of community, really, in many ways. In August we looked at Acts 2. Right after the day of Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit came, there were thousands of people who put their trust in Christ on that very first day, and they came together and began to function together as a community. They had a common set of priorities: the priority to know God better together; the priority to learn how to pray and talk to God; to celebrate what Christ had done for them together (communion); and also to share and meet each other's needs together in community.

We learned that the scope of that was that their entire life they cared for the whole person. It said that if there was a person with a physical need or a financial need or a spiritual need or an emotional need, the church was there for each other. They were there to care and minister to each other in that way, and that community was vibrant. People were attracted to Jesus as they looked at those people and how they functioned together. Many people were added to the faith just because they marveled at the relationships those people had and how they loved each other in very practical ways.

What do you suppose would have happened if that church would have just stayed in Jerusalem? What if they had just continued to live and dwell there, and that community basically became a closed circle? What do you suppose would have happened? My guess is that, over the course of time, as it happens in any community that “closes ranks” and no longer grows, it would have begun to break down. People would have started not getting

along so well with each other. They would have lost some of that sense of awe which they felt because God was at work. They would have just become so comfortable with each other, that perhaps they would not ever have reached out and thought about what God had really put them on earth to do. So God, in His wisdom, saw fit to move them out of Jerusalem, and He did it in a pretty dramatic fashion. That's what we want to look at today in Acts 7.

Acts 6 and 7 record the story of Stephen. As that community wanted to meet the needs of all the people, they realized that there were people whose needs were not being met. There were people who were going without food and some were not being cared for. So they appointed Stephen to be a deacon to oversee the feeding of widows and care for those people who were being neglected. It says that Stephen was a man full of the Holy Spirit. He was controlled by the Spirit of God, and he was also a man full of wisdom. He not only served tables and made sure that things got done, but he also spoke very eloquently of Christ and proclaimed Christ wherever he went. He would get into discussions with other Jewish leaders, and they couldn't argue with them, so they got mad.

Ultimately they dragged Stephen out of the city, as it says in Acts 7:58. When they couldn't contend with Stephen any longer, they stoned him to death. We're told there was a man named Saul who was an "up-and-coming" leader in that Jewish community, and the witnesses laid their garments at his feet. That basically meant he had some authority – some role to play in Stephen's stoning – and people recognized him as one of the leaders in that movement of trying to put down those early Christians. Acts 8:1 says:

And Saul was in hearty agreement with putting him to death, and on that day a great persecution arose against the church in Jerusalem; and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles. But Saul began ravaging the church, entering house after house; and dragging off men and women, he would put them into prison.

God orchestrated and allowed there to be a great persecution to arise in that church, and the result of it was that these people were scattered. They were forced to move beyond their comfort zone of Jerusalem and their close friends, to have to reach out and go into new territories. In verse 4 it says that "those who had been scattered went about preaching the word." The result of that persecution was that they launched out into the surrounding villages, towns, cities and areas and began to speak about Jesus. People who would have never had a chance to know about Him before were now getting a chance to hear.

You'll notice in verse 1 that it says they were all scattered, except the apostles. We sometimes have the idea that it's the responsibility of the paid professionals, the pastors, missionaries and evangelists, to go out and reach people with the Gospel. It was exactly the opposite in this case. The apostles, the spiritual leaders, were left in Jerusalem. That was the hub of the church and so they stayed behind, in spite of the persecution, and all the rest of the people who were part of that church were scattered about. They were the ones who went out and proclaimed the good news of Jesus. They were the ones who extended community to others.

Community is not just about this closed circle and what happens within, but God has called us into community to extend ourselves out to others. In chapters 8, 9 and 10 we see two very important ways we are to extend community outside the circle of Christians and friends that we know – out into the world.

The first is by sharing Jesus with people who don't know Him. You'll recall that Jesus said in Acts 1:8, "You shall be My witnesses both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and even to the remotest part of the earth." That was God's great passion. He sent Jesus so that men from every tongue, tribe and nation would have a chance to know Him – to be saved out of their sin. What has always been God's heartbeat and His passion is His love for people. He doesn't desire that anyone would perish, but that all would come to an understanding of the truth. God wanted these Christians to be a part of extending His grace and truth to others, so He allowed this persecution to rise. He basically forced them "out of the nest" to go out into the world and begin to proclaim that message. The rest of the book of Acts is the account of how that happened from city to city, province to province, and nation to nation. We are here this morning because of the obedience of those disciples in going out and sharing that Good News. It eventually, after centuries, came to the United States of America, and we have a chance to know Christ because of the obedience of these people.

Let's look at a couple of stories in Acts 8 and one in Acts 10 that highlight what it meant for these people to go out and extend the truth and grace about Jesus to others. The first one is in Acts 8, starting in verse 26, which is a story about Philip, one of the apostles. It says, "But an angel of the Lord spoke to Philip saying, 'Arise and go south to the road that descends from Jerusalem to Gaza. (This is a desert road).'" If you look at a map in the back of your Bible, you will see a road going down from Jerusalem to Gaza. Philip is in Jerusalem and an angel says, "Philip, I want you to go out onto that road, along the desert." He didn't tell him why and he didn't tell him what he'd find there, but Philip went.

v27: "And he arose and went; and behold, there was an Ethiopian eunuch, a court official of Candace, queen of the Ethiopians, who was in charge of all her treasure; and he had come to Jerusalem to worship. And he was returning and sitting in his chariot, and he was reading the prophet Isaiah." Here was a man – an Ethiopian, an African, a wealthy man – a man who had great power and position. He was the treasurer for the queen of Ethiopia. But the only thing we can learn from this is that he was someone who was hungry to know God. Many believed he had become a Jewish proselyte, that he had done the steps he needed to do as a Gentile to be accepted among the Jews, so great was his hunger and desire to know God. He had gone to Jerusalem to worship and somewhere he had picked up a scroll with the book of Isaiah in it. He was sitting in his chariot, going home, reading through the Scriptures, he was so hungry for God. The picture I have is somebody going into the hotel at night and picking up the Gideon Bible that's in the drawer. They're hungry to know God and they try to read it. This man, like so many others, couldn't understand what he was reading. And just at the right moment, as he was reading Isaiah 53, God has ordained Philip to be there just at the right time and the right place, and he comes up alongside the chariot.

v29-34: And the Spirit said to Philip, "Go up and join the chariot." And when Philip had run up, he heard him reading Isaiah the prophet, and said, "Do you understand what you are reading?" And He said, "Well, how could I, unless someone guides me?" And he invited Philip to come up and sit with him. Now the passage of Scripture which he was reading was this: "HE WAS LED AS A SHEEP TO SLAUGHTER; AND AS A LAMB BEFORE ITS SHEARER IS SILENT, SO HE DOES NOT OPEN HIS MOUTH. IN HUMILIATION HIS JUDGMENT WAS TAKEN AWAY; WHO SHALL RELATE HIS GENERATION? FOR HIS LIFE IS REMOVED FROM THE EARTH." And the eunuch answered Philip and said, "Please tell me, of whom does the prophet say this? Of himself, or of someone else?"

How many of us would love to have the opportunity where you go out to share Jesus with someone, and you're at the right moment of time and the person is reading the Bible and says, "I don't understand what this says. Can you explain it to me?" What an awesome thing that the Holy Spirit had prepared this man, so that he was seeking God when Philip came along, just at the right moment. Notice what it says that Philip did (v35): "Philip opened his mouth, and beginning from this very Scripture he preached Jesus to him."

Philip was not only obedient to go when God said, "Go, I want you to extend My truth and grace to someone who needs it down on the road to Gaza." But Philip also had grown enough in his own faith that he was able to explain to this man what the Scripture meant when we were reading it. Some of us, if we had been in that situation, might have said, "Well, gee, I don't know what it means." This man was ready; he had learned it; he knew it; and he was able to be right there at the right time and the right place to explain to him what he was reading. And as he shared that, the man came upon some water and said, "Can I be baptized?" Philip said, "If you believe, you can be baptized." The man professed his faith in Christ, he was baptized right there, and it says he "went on his way rejoicing." Many believe that this man launched the first non-Jerusalem church in Africa, as he went back to Ethiopia into his position of authority. Philip was there at just the right moment when that God-seeker needed some answers. That was a stretch, because he was not a Jew, at least not by race. It was a stretch for Philip to go and relate to someone so very different from himself.

Peter had an even greater challenge in Acts 10, which I encourage you to read. A Roman soldier who lived at Caesarea was also seeking God. He was wanting to know God desperately and he had a vision that God said, "I heard your prayer and your desire to know me, so I want you to go down to Joppa and ask for a man named Cephas (or Peter), who is staying at this man's house." So he sent a couple of his servants down to Joppa, and while they were on their way, Peter was up on the roof of the house taking a nap in the middle of the afternoon. While he was taking a nap, he has a vision of this unclean food, this Gentile food, coming down – things that Peter never would have dreamed of touching or eating. In the vision, three times this sheet with unclean food came down and Peter was repulsed by it. Just when that dream was being completed, there was a knock at the door, and these men were coming. The Lord said to Peter, "Peter, here's the meaning of the dream you just had. I am no longer calling those who are Gentiles unclean. They, too, will receive my message and I want you to go without hesitation or reservation to those Gentiles." He was talking about people, who just moments before, he would never have associated with because they were unclean. But the Spirit of God made it clear that no longer was God thinking of clean and unclean, but that *all* men could come to a knowledge of truth.

Peter, no doubt, knew that somewhere down in his heart, because Jesus had already said, "I'm going to take you and you're going to go to the uttermost parts of the earth and proclaim the message." Peter had to lay aside all of his prejudices and all of those customs and cultural things that kept him away from these people. Those things caused him to think of the people as less than human at times, so Peter had to start thinking about them the way God thought about them. They were people whom God loved and whom God wanted to do a great work in. It says Peter went with those men, and here's an amazing thing. When Peter got to the house of Cornelius, Cornelius has already brought together a huge group of people to hear the message. I marvel at this, because sometimes when we think that God has called us to share our faith with other people, we get so worried and think, *How will I do it? What will I say? Will I get anybody to listen?* But here's a non-Christian who is evangelizing. Here's this man who doesn't even know Jesus yet, who has invited his entire family and all

his friends and he says, “They’re all waiting for Peter.” Peter comes in, and all he has to do is explain who Jesus is and an entire crowd, Cornelius’s family and all his friends, became Christians on that day. A whole new era was now launched in the advance of the Gospel. God had to call those people out of that very close-knit Jewish community in Jerusalem to step out, cross the boundaries, reach out to people who were very different from themselves, and share the grace and truth of Christ.

We operate off of some false assumptions. One assumption that I think many of us operate off of is that most people in the world are not interested in spiritual things. Most of the time we have the sense that people around us don’t really care much about spiritual things. We think that they don’t really care about God and about their relationship with Him – until we run into an event like the one which happened two weeks ago. And of a sudden, everyone is scrambling to try to make sense out of this tragedy. As Bryan said last week, when the crisis came, people didn’t flock to the university. They went to churches. They went to try and find God in the middle of all that. There *is* a spiritual hunger, and there *are* people who are seeking God. People don’t necessarily seek it; it’s not something they talk about at the water cooler at work. It’s not something that maybe you overhear at the restaurant when people are conversing. But somewhere deep in their hearts, because God created them to want to know Him, people *do* have a spiritual hunger. The question is: Will we be like the early Christians and launch out and share the Good News? Will we be the ones who extend grace and truth to those who don’t know Him?

How far is God willing to go in extending grace and truth? Who is beyond the reach of the Gospel? Who is too far gone in their sin? Who is too evil to be reached? Acts chapter 9 makes it quite clear that no one is. Acts 9:1 brings the story back to Saul: “Now Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest, and asked for letters from him to the synagogues at Damascus, so that if he found any belonging to the Way {*any followers of Jesus* }, both men and women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem.” Saul had reeked a reign of terror down on the church of Jerusalem. He had participated in the murder of an innocent man. It said he ravaged the churches of God, house to house, dragging people off. The picture that comes to my mind is what we know happened in Nazi Germany, where they would go into houses and drag people out in the middle of the night and haul them off to concentration camps. That’s the terror that Saul caused. Now he’s headed 150 miles to Damascus. As the church scattered, he had heard there was this vibrant community up in Damascus, so his anger and hatred toward God caused him to want to go squelch it, drag the people back and put them into prison. And on his way, Saul had an encounter with God.

Acts 9:3: “And it came about that as he journeyed, he was approaching Damascus, and suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him; and he fell to the ground, and heard a voice saying to him, ‘Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?’ And he said, ‘Who art Thou, Lord?’ ” I think that’s very interesting; he knew right away who it was. “And He said, ‘I am Jesus whom you are persecuting.’ ” Jesus so identifies with His followers, that if somebody is persecuting one of His followers, they’re persecuting Him. That’s because we are part of His family. “He said, ‘I am Jesus whom you are persecuting, but rise, and enter the city, and it shall be told you what you must do. And the men who traveled with him stood speechless, hearing the voice, but seeing no one. And Saul got up from the ground, and though his eyes were open, he could see nothing and leading him by the hand, they brought him into Damascus. And he was three days without sight, and neither ate nor drank.”

Can you think of anyone less deserving of God's grace and forgiveness than Saul? He was the antagonist - the one who really would be thought of in our terms today as a terrorist of the Christian community. He was a murderer. But God was opening the eyes of these new Christians to see that His grace can extend even to the worst of sinners ... to the most awful person you can think of. God's grace can even reach them, and they can be transformed. They can be changed. No one is beyond hope as long as they have life and breath. So, little by little, they began to see that God's unfolding love and His plan reaches to all people ... to ALL people. It crosses every race, every culture, and every social class. It crosses every kind of character that you can find. God has called us, like He called these people, to be ones who extend grace and truth, wherever and whenever we have the opportunity. I have to believe those people were praying for Saul. I believe those people were such prayer warriors that one of the things they were praying must have been, "Lord, either destroy him or save him. Get rid of him ... or save him." And somehow, in God's grace and mercy, He saved Saul. God has called us to extend truth and grace to people who do not know Him - people who are hungry but will never tell us, unless we go up and introduce ourselves, strike up a conversation, enter into their life and find out what's really going on in their hearts, and introduce them to Jesus.

The second way we are supposed to extend community beyond our little circle is what happened immediately following Saul's conversion. Saul went into Damascus when he was blind and hadn't eaten and was staying in this house. Notice what it says in verse 10: "Now there was a certain disciple at Damascus, named Ananias; and the Lord said to him in a vision, Ananias.' " And he said, "Here am I, Lord." And the Lord said to him, "Good, I'm glad you're awake." No, he said, "Arise and go to the street called Straight, and inquire at the house of Judas for a man from Tarsus named Saul, for behold, he is praying, and he has seen in a vision a man named Ananias come in and lay hands on him, so that he might regain his sight." Now this is Ananias' nightmare vision from God. Can you imagine getting a vision in the middle of the night like this. Suppose there's one person whom you fear more than any other. You know that his primary purpose for coming is to drag people like you off to prison and perhaps even to your death. And you get a vision in the night from God saying, "I want you to go down to the house where he's staying and go in and visit with him." Ananias' response is, "Lord, I think maybe you've got the wrong guy." In verse 13 he says:

"Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much harm he did to Thy saints at Jerusalem; and here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who call upon Thy name." But the Lord said to him, "Go, for he is a chosen instrument of Mine, to bear My name before the Gentiles and kings and the sons of Israel; for I will show him how much he must suffer for My name's sake." And Ananias departed and entered the house, and after laying his hands on him said, "Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus who appeared to you on the road by which you were coming, has sent me so that you may regain your sight, and be filled with the Holy Spirit." And immediately there fell from his eyes something like scales, and he regained his sight, and he arose and was baptized; and he took food and was strengthened.

God called Ananias to be the one who would extend acceptance and give a welcome to this new Christian. It wasn't easy to do, because this was his antagonist – this was the enemy. But he did it. The same thing happened three years later when Saul went to Jerusalem. It says in verse 26 that he was trying to associate with the disciples and he was trying to get connected with them. He was one of them; he wanted to be brothers with them. He wanted to talk and share and grow together with them. But they were afraid of him, it says, until Barnabas came along. Verse 27: "But Barnabas took hold of him and brought him to the

apostles and described to them how he had seen the Lord on the road, and that He had talked to him, and how at Damascus he had spoken out boldly in the name of Jesus.”

In my book, Ananias and Barnabas are really heroes. They stepped out of their comfort zone in obedience to God and welcomed this person, who had been their enemy, into the family. They received him just like a brother. They didn't receive him with hesitation. They didn't say, “Well, you know, you've been so awful that you're going to be on probation for about five years. We're just going to take a look and see before we get too close to you.” No, Ananias put his arms around Saul, laid his hands on him and called him, “Brother.” And Barnabas embraced him and brought him to the other disciples and said, “I want you to meet this man who's been changed. God can change anybody and here's Saul – he's a changed man – and I want you to welcome him in as part of the family.”

I was trying to think of any modern day examples of people having to embrace someone who had been such an antagonist before. And I'm reminded of the story of Corrie ten Boom who was in a Nazi concentration camp during WWII. Her family had hidden Jews in their home and ultimately were found out and arrested. Her parents were killed; she never saw them again. Corrie and her sister, Betsy, were put into a concentration camp, and there was a particular guard who made their life miserable day in and day out. He brutalized them. He beat them; he mocked them; he spit upon them. He stripped their clothes off and shoved them into the shower, and she hated him. She loathed that man for all that he stood for. And ultimately Corrie's sister died in that concentration camp.

It was not too long after the war that she was invited back to Germany to speak. She didn't want to go, but she agreed to go, and her talk that day was on forgiveness. She got about ten minutes into the speech when she noticed that right down front, about five or six rows back, was this face that she recognized instantly as the face of that guard. She said she could tell by the look on his face, the glow, the smile that he had, that he'd become a Christian. This man that she had so hated for what he had done to her sister was sitting there now as a Christian. She finished the talk, and sure enough, the very first person who came running down front was this man. He held out his arms and said, “Ah, Corrie, isn't the love and forgiveness of God wonderful!” Corrie says she looked at him and she still hated him. She prayed to God and said, “God, I can't love this man in my flesh. I hate him for everything that he did. But if you called me to love him, then you're going to have to help me to love him. You are going to have to love him through me.” She said she heard the voice of the Spirit saying to her, as clear as the day, “Corrie, just hold out your hand.” Then she made a very remarkable statement. She said, “It took all of my years of obeying God in obscurity to do the hardest thing I ever had to do. I held out my hand.” And she said as she held out her hand to shake that man's hand, all of the anger and hatred just drained out of her life, and she was filled with love for this man. There they embraced one another as brother and sister in Christ. Two people who had hated each other ... now part of the same family. What an awesome picture of community – welcoming even antagonists into the family.

Another similar incident happened in 1973. It was the heart of the Watergate scandal and Chuck Colson had been the hatchet man for President Nixon. He was a ruthless politician and if anybody, any political enemy, got in his way he would try to do anything he could to destroy him. He was one of the most hated men in all of Washington for his activity. He had been caught in the Watergate scandal and he resigned from his office. In the midst of all that, he began to search for God. A man had shared Jesus with him and given him C.S. Lewis' book, *Mere Christianity*. Colson went off to a retreat in Maine where he read that book, and

in the process of reading it, he gave his life to Christ. He came back to Washington and told the man who had shared with him, and that man had Doug Coe contact him and say, “You know, Chuck, there are Christians all over the city. We get together and pray, and I want you to meet some of them.”

Doug Coe then called Harold Hughes, a Democratic Senator from Iowa. These men were on opposite poles, politically, but they were now both Christians, and they arranged a dinner party. Hughes didn’t want anything to do with Colson, but he reluctantly agreed. They got together, and after a half hour or so of small talk with everyone being a little uncomfortable having these foes in the same room, Harold Hughes said, “Chuck, I hear you’ve had an encounter with Jesus. Tell us about it.” Chuck sort of stammered out, having never done this before in his life, and began to tell his story of how he had become a new Christian and that he had a lot to learn. He said, “If you can help me learn something, please do, because I don’t know anything.” This is how Chuck describes the reaction:

For a moment there was silence. Harold (Hughes), whose face had been enigmatic while I talked, suddenly lifted both hands in the air and brought them down hard on his knees. “That’s all I need to know. Chuck, you have accepted Jesus and He has forgiven you. I do the same. I love you now as my brother in Christ. I will stand with you, defend you anywhere and trust you with anything I have.” I was so overwhelmed, so astonished, in fact, that I could only utter a feeble, “Thank you.” In all my life no one had ever been so warm and loving to me outside of my family. And now it was coming from a man who had loathed me for years and whom I had only known for barely two hours.

- from *Born Again* by Charles W. Colson, p. 169

It wasn’t too long after that, when Colson was sentenced to prison, that these same men, Harold Hughes, Al Quie, and Graham Purcell all went to the government and said, “Can we serve Chuck Colson’s prison sentence for him?”

That kind of acceptance is what God wants us to be like. When people come to know Jesus, we extend a hand of acceptance and love, regardless of where they’ve been in the past. It doesn’t matter whether it is a drug dealer or an abuser or a criminal or an ex-spouse or your parents with whom you had a bad relationship. It doesn’t matter who it is. When people come to Christ, they are part of the family and God wants us to reach out and accept them and welcome them in. That’s what these people did. That’s what God has called us to be a part of, just like he called those early Christians – to extend the grace and truth of Jesus to people well outside of our little circle of friends. And when they make a decision for Christ, we are called to gladly welcome them into the family, to embrace them and say, “Walk with me and I’ll show you how this all works.”

I want to challenge all of us to do just that – to not think of community as something we have just among ourselves, but to see that it is an ever-expanding circle to be shared. May we be willing to step out in obedience when God tells us to go and to share that truth and love with others.