

July 28, 2024

As You Are Going: The Hand of the Lord was with Them

Acts 11:19-30

Vernon Advent Christian Church

Intro...Over the last several weeks we have seen in the Book of Acts how the church, through the message of the gospel and the power of the Holy Spirit, continued to grow through the trials of its infancy including threats to its unity from within and persecution from without. And we've seen that it was this persecution, that ramped up in ch. 8 immediately following the death of Stephen, that caused the church in Jerusalem to scatter and the gospel began to reach beyond Jerusalem into the areas of Judea and Samaria. Luke, the author of Acts, has followed one thread of storyline, if you will, in chs. 8 through the first half of ch. 11 as it directly related to the Apostles (namely Peter), the deacons (namely Philip) and the church as a whole in Jerusalem as God was doing things in their midst that changed the way they thought about salvation not just among the Jews, but among the Gentiles also. But in our passage today, Luke takes us back to the point of persecution and scattering in ch. 8 to follow another thread that was happening simultaneously to the storyline we have been looking at to let us know that God was at work in other places. Isn't it amazing to think about the fact that God is not bound by to space and time and that he is completing his mission all over the world all at the same time? This morning were going to follow along with a group of believers who fled Jerusalem because of the threat of persecution but made it a point to share the gospel as they were going with whoever came across their path. If you are able, please stand with me as I read the Word of God from Acts 11:19-30. [Read Passage]

In this passage, we see another example of the church continuing to grow. From a small group of persecuted Christians, the church in Antioch grew and saw large numbers of people come to faith in Christ. In fact, three times Luke underscores these large numbers (vs. 21, 24, 26). But the reason this church experienced such remarkable growth was not that the leaders employed the latest church growth principles. They didn't do a demographic study of Antioch and come up with a marketing strategy. Rather, the reason for the growth was simple: "The hand of the Lord was with them" (11:21). This was a church that God was blessing. This isn't to say that it's wrong to plan or to strategize about how to reach our community, but our aim should be that the hand of the Lord would be with us. And to be a church that God blesses, there is a few things we can learn from the church of Antioch.

Now, putting into practice the principles that this church followed will not necessarily result in numerical growth, since God does not always bring numerical growth along with his blessing. And, it would be a mistake to conclude that God is blessing every large church just because there are a lot of people there. But we would certainly hinder God's blessing if we knowingly and purposely went against the principles we read about today. If we want the hand of the Lord to be with us, then we would do well to study and follow the example of the church in Antioch. There are several principles I want to point out:

The first, **God blesses the church where every member is involved in the mission.** The formation and the growth of the church at Antioch was arguably one of the most significant events in the history of Western civilization. This isn't just hyperbole. Consider this one event led to the formation of the Christian church as set apart from the Jewish synagogue, in which it blended together into one body both Jews and Gentiles. It was here that the followers of Jesus

were first called Christians we're told in (vs. 26). From Antioch, the church launched the first mission to Europe which we'll see beginning in ch. 13 of the Book of Acts. In fact, you can make the argument that you and I and the rest of the American Church would not be gathered together today had it not been for God's blessing on this church. Now understanding God's perfect plan and sovereignty, we are here because God chose to use this church but you get the point.

One of the amazing things about this church was how it started. It was not founded by one of the apostles or any other trained missionaries. Rather, some unnamed men who were scattered because of the persecution that arose in connection with Stephen came to Antioch and began talking, not just to the Jews, but to the Hellenists (Gentiles/Greeks), telling them the good news about the Lord Jesus (11:20). In other words, as these men were going, they were telling others about Jesus. The Greek word for "speak" (11:19, 20) is the word for normal conversation. The implication is that these men didn't preach in the marketplace or even in the synagogues. Rather, in their everyday contacts with people, they simply told others about Jesus Christ.

Luke mentions where they were from, yet they remain unnamed. [Read] But the fact that they are not named tells us that they were ordinary people who had met the Lord Jesus and who wanted others to know him, too. We all should follow their example.

Note also that even when Barnabas and Saul later rose to positions of leadership later in our passage, this church did not depend on them in order to function and grow. They would send both of them back to Jerusalem with the funds gathered for famine relief, a trip which would have taken at least a couple of months, and they keep going. Later, when the Holy Spirit set apart Barnabas and Saul for the first missionary journey in ch. 13, the church could send off these two key leaders and, again, keep right on rolling. This was because this church knew the truth that God has gifted every member of his church and each one is expected to exercise his or her gift in ministry to accomplish the mission whatever that gift may be.

If the spreading of the gospel or the functioning of the church depends on the work of full-time workers, such as pastors and missionaries, the ministry will be severely limited. But if every person who has trusted in Christ as Savior and Lord feels the obligation of serving him and of telling others the good news about him, the gospel will spread and the church will be built up. Every Christian should recognize his or her responsibility to serve Christ and share him with others and fulfill the mission we're all called to.

Secondly, we see in this passage that **God blesses the church where the mission is to proclaim the gospel**. To understand our text, you need to know something about Antioch itself. It was located 300 miles north of Jerusalem and was the third largest city in the Roman empire, behind Rome and Alexandria, having a population of more than 500,000 people. It was a center for commerce and a crossroads for travel and trade between Europe and modern day Asia. This made the city a melting pot of various kinds of people, including the Romans, the local Syrians, Jews, and many others.

Like most large cities of its day, it was known for sexual immorality. Worship of the gods Daphne, Artemis and Apollo was rampant and most pursued their religion of pleasure through the means of temple prostitution. It is significant then that when God chose a city that would become the center for his missionary work, he picked a morally corrupt city like Antioch. In this secular, pagan environment, ordinary everyday Christians began telling the simple gospel message that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, that whosoever believes in him receives eternal life and forgiveness as God's free gift of grace. The same gospel that is the power of God for salvation to the Jews proved to be the power of God for salvation to these pagan Gentiles as well. So, what excuse do we have? We live in an increasingly pagan culture,

but not unlike the culture of Antioch and many of the cities of the Roman Empire. The hand of the Lord was with them because these men proclaimed the message of the gospel.

The end of verse 20 literally reads, [Read] And we read that a large number who believed turned to the Lord. This means that these former pagans gave up their idols, their sexual immorality, and their corrupt business practices when they put their trust in Jesus as Lord. When Barnabas came, he witnessed the grace of God (11:23). Now, you can't see God's grace, but you can see the effects of it in a person's life. He could see that God had changed these people through the gospel.

Whatever their culture or background, people need to know how to be reconciled to God. And if we will be faithful to proclaim the simple gospel message to the people we come into contact with, God will bless us as a church.

The next principle we find in our passage today is that **God blesses the church where His grace is the focal point of the mission**. There was a note of concern behind the Jerusalem church's sending Barnabas to Antioch. It was one thing when the God-fearing Gentile, Cornelius, had become a Christian through the preaching of Peter that we have talked about the last several weeks. That stretched the limit of their thinking. But when a bunch of pagans from a notoriously immoral place like Antioch started coming to faith in Christ through the witness of ordinary men and not one of the Apostles, it was time for the mother church to check things out. So, they sent Barnabas. Now, there is something to be said about the authority of the Church. And it was good from them to check things out as it was their responsibility to make sure the integrity of the gospel message remained intact. But as God was changing their thinking on such matters they were concerned about the reports they were hearing.

Note what Barnabas saw and how he responded. He saw the grace of God and he rejoiced (11:23). Barnabas was a man who lived by God's grace, and so he saw the grace of God and rejoiced. No doubt he also saw a lot of imperfection in these new converts. New believers do not drop all of their baggage the day they get saved. A church made up of people from such different backgrounds as those in Antioch was bound to have some problems and conflicts. But rather than focusing on the imperfections and the problems, Barnabas focused on God's grace in saving these people. Instead of slapping a bunch of Jewish rules on them, he rejoiced at what God was doing, and then began to encourage them to remain true to the Lord. God's grace was the focal point of this church and God blessed them for it.

We also see that **God blesses the church where grace is the motivation for the mission**. God's grace teaches us to deny worldly desires and to live sensibly, righteously, and godly in the present age (Titus 2:12). Barnabas could see that these new believers needed to grow in their faith. He knew that it's one thing to make a profession of faith, but it's another thing to live it out and persevere and grow when temptations and trials hit, as surely they will.

Genuine conversion is a matter of the heart. Thus Barnabas, true to his name ("Son of Encouragement") began to encourage these new Christians to remain true to the Lord, which is a literal translation of v. 23. Steadfastness in the Christian life is not an accident, but a matter of purpose. Because God has been gracious in saving us, we must determine in our hearts to follow him no matter what kinds of hardships we encounter. We must purpose to deny ourselves and follow the Lord Jesus. He is the all-sufficient One who can meet our every need. He has done the greatest thing by loving us and giving himself for us on the cross. He has promised that he will not leave us or forsake us. Thus the church that God blesses is made up of members who see themselves as ministers of God's grace. They proclaim the gospel as the power of God to save

sinner from every kind of background. Grace permeated the church in Antioch and was their motivation to remain steadfast in the Lord. Let us, again, follow their example.

The next principle we see in our text is that **God blesses the church where godly leaders set the example for the mission.** Luke states that Barnabas “was a good man, and full of the Holy Spirit and of faith” (11:24). Note that he was a man of integrity. He practiced what he preached. Those who knew him well said, “He is a good man.” The reason he was a good man was that he was full of the Holy Spirit and full of faith in the living God.

Barnabas’ heart was to seek the glory of God through the building up of His church, not to seek a name for himself. At some point, he began to realize that the work in Antioch was more than he could handle. So, he left Antioch and traveled the 100 miles to Tarsus to search for Saul. Now remember, Saul has been in Tarsus for approximately 10 to 12 years waiting for direction from the Lord. And his time was now. (Interesting to consider that these men who started the church in Antioch were those that fled Jerusalem because of the threats of Saul!)

Notice Barnabas was not threatened to bring Saul back to share in the work with him. And eventually, he took a back seat to Paul’s leadership in their missionary work. And so we see his example of humbleness in leadership. Continue to pray for your pastors and elders that we would continue to follow this principle of setting the example for living out the mission. May we be able to say will the Apostle Paul as he wrote in 1 Cor. 11:1, “Follow me as I follow Christ.”

**God also blesses the church where godly leaders are devoted to teaching the mission as contained in God’s Word.** Barnabas and Saul met with the church for an entire year (11:26). Then we read, “and the disciples were first called Christians in Antioch.” Probably this was a nickname that the pagans in town gave them. It literally meant, “of the party of Jesus,” or, more simply, “followers of Jesus.” Interestingly, the term “Christian” is only used in the Bible two other times.

It is implied that the reason people could identify these people as Christians was that they lived in accordance with Barnabas’ and Saul’s teaching of God’s Word. The point of all Bible teaching should be to change the way we think, our attitudes, the way we talk, and the way we act, beginning at home and extending into the world. Others should recognize that we are like Jesus because we obey his Word, namely, in love. The Bible tells us in John 13:35, “By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.” Do others notice that you are different? Would they know to call you a “Christian” whether it was intended as an insult or not? That’s something for us all to consider.

Finally, **God blesses the church where the members are devoted to the mission through their generous giving.** Now, the function of a prophet was to edify, exhort, and/or bring comfort from God’s Word (1 Cor. 14:3). A true prophet received direct revelation from God for the purpose of relaying God’s message to the church. And we’re told in vs. 27 and following that a group of prophets came to Antioch, and one of them, Agabus, predicted a coming famine. And the church’s immediate response was to give toward the relief of the believers living in Judea, and to send the gift with Barnabas and Saul. Luke shows that they didn’t just come up with this great idea; they actually did it (11:30), without any pressure or organizing from their leaders.

The famine easily could have hit Antioch as well as Judea. The church members in Antioch could have said, “We need to look out for our own needs; let the Jewish brothers take care of themselves.” But they trusted God and gave to meet the needs of others. The point here is that scripture teaches that God will pour out his blessing on a generous church. Now I can say that it has been my experience, and we have commended you throughout the years, historically this church as always been a very generous church in terms of giving to needs as we have seen

them arise. But let us not stop, but continue, with the Lord's discernment, to give to the Lord and watch as he blesses us for being faithful to him in our giving. In fact, the only time God ever says to test me is in the area of giving when in Malachi 3:10 he says, "Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse... Test me in this, says the Lord Almighty, and see if I will not throw open the floodgates of Heaven and pour out so much blessing that there will not be room enough to store it."

And so, the church in Antioch, is set before us as an example. It was a church founded by simple, ordinary believers who knew that God had called every Christian to serve him. They proclaimed the gospel as the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes. God's grace was the focal point and the motivation for everything they did. Their leaders set the example and taught them from God's Word. And they were generous givers, trusting God to meet their needs. And the hand of the Lord was with them, and a great many people were added to the Lord. Many things were said of us. As we are going, let's follow the example of the Church in Antioch and be a Church on Mission.