

Difficult Times for Kingdom Purposes

Acts 11:19-30

let's face it, there are times in life when it's just HARD. Depending upon the phase of your life, you can suddenly get hit hard with

- Family conflicts,
- Forced job changes,
- Major spiritual attacks,
- Life impacting health issues,
- The loss of loved ones,
- Financial calamity,
- And the list goes on...

Quite often the outcome of these major life issues **depends upon how we respond to them.**

And how we respond to them **most often depends upon our overall view of life, our relationship to the Lord, and our belief in His Sovereign hand over all His creation.**

More often than not, we don't know what God is doing **today**, there's **no way we can figure out tomorrow**, and we still **don't understand yesterday.**

The words of the chorus of an old Gospel song seem to fit so well:

*So let the storms rage high
The dark clouds rise
They don't worry me
For I'm sheltered safe within the arms of God*

*He walks with me
And naught of earth shall harm me*

For I'm sheltered in the arms of God

More times than not, we need to rest in that truth, that whatever the issues in our life, our God is working a more excellent plan and purpose than we could ever imagine.

We are going to be in the last half of **chapter 11 in the book of Acts** this morning.

We have already found that as Luke writes the historical record found in the book of Acts, he uses the conversion of Cornelius, the Roman Centurion in chapter 10 as a primary pivot point in the preaching of the Gospel and the growth of the Church. It's at this point where the emphasis of the Gospel begins **impacting the Gentiles**, as well as the Jews... if not impacting the Gentiles more so than the Jews.

From this point forward we see primarily Gentiles coming to a saving knowledge of the Savior, particularly as Luke soon begins covering the ministry of the Apostle Paul. As we have shared several times in the course of our study, up until this point in Acts, the Church had primarily been made up of all Jewish Converts.

Since the Church was made up of primarily Jews who had come to recognize Jesus of Nazareth as the truth Messiah of Israel, the Church had continued to **look..., worship..., and act..., very Jewish**. As a matter of fact in many communities Jewish Christians were **still a part of the local synagogues**.

But a major change is now taking place – not because the Jewish/Christians wanted the change, but because God knew that **if their quiet little world wasn't shaken**, the hope of the Gospel message for all men **would never make it out of Judaism**.

We've seen the transition happening in a small part over the last few chapters: But God is about to blow the doors wide open, **AND** we are going to find that **not everyone is going to be happy with changes**.

The change took place partially due to the persecution which came upon the Church after the stoning of Stephen, but also due to the Holy Spirit's prompting, in **chapter 8 we find Philip and later the Apostles Peter and John** traveling from Jerusalem (the current center of both Judaism and the Church), **down to Samaria**, to **bring the hope of the Gospel to those who were half Jew, half Gentile**.

Then in chapter 10 the Lord took **Peter to the house of Cornelius – a God fearer, but a Gentile all the same**. Then, once he hears the Gospel he comes to know Jesus Christ as Savior and Redeemer, his life is brought into the Kingdom of God in just the same way as the Jewish Believers came to a saving knowledge. **Now he's a Gentile who is a Believer, him and his household.**

But God wasn't finished.

God's plan continues to reach out to the *lost of the Lost*.

- Not just to Jews,
- Not just to part Jew-part Gentile,
- His plan is reaching out even beyond God-fearing Gentiles!
- His plan is to reach out to the **pagan of the pagans; those who neither knew God, nor feared Him.**

And, what we see is, God is using **the process of persecution to drive His evangelists, His teachers, and His disciples** to the very lands where the vast majority of the people were **vile, pagan, idol worshipers**.

Let's look at Acts 11, beginning in verse 19 –

Acts 11

*¹⁹ Now those who were scattered after the persecution that arose over Stephen traveled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus, and Antioch, preaching the word to **no one but the Jews only**. ²⁰ But some of them were men from Cyprus and Cyrene, who, when they had come to Antioch, spoke to the Hellenists, preaching the Lord Jesus. ²¹ And the hand of the Lord was with them, and a great number believed and turned to the Lord.*

Some of those driven out of Jerusalem due to the persecution were driven north to the area of Phoenicia, the land we now know as **Lebanon**. The cities of Tyre and Sidon were in the area of Phoenicia. **Hiram I of Tyre** was the one who supplied the cedars of Lebanon to David for his palace and to Solomon for his palace and the Temple. The early Phoenicians were **known for their craftsmanship**, as well as being some of the **greatest sailors of the day**.

But **it was also** from Phoenicia that a woman named **Jezebel**, *“the princess from Tyre”* came and married **Ahab the King of the Northern Kingdom of Israel**: and with her she brought the *pagan worship of Baal into the Northern Kingdom*. Shortly thereafter, their daughter, the **offspring of Ahab and Jezebel** married **Jehoram of the Southern Kingdom of Judah** and brings her **Baal worship to the Southern Kingdom**.

As we move closer to New Testament times we find that Phoenicia and the surrounding areas are taken over by the Greeks and then the Romans. With rise of their Empires, the religion of the area moved more to focus on the **collection of gods and goddesses of the Greek cults**. In reference to the gods and goddesses worshiped by the Phoenicians during the First Century..., I’m quoting from the **Baker Encyclopedia of the Bible...**

“On the female side there was really only one deity worshiped in all the cities, the mother and fertility goddess Ashtart or Astarte (Heb. Ashtoreth), the Babylonian Ishtar. She was regarded as the mother of the gods and man, as well as plants. *Promiscuity characterized her conduct and religious prostitution was carried on in her name.*¹

That was the heart of **Phoenicia**.

But, out in the Mediterranean Sea, some 50 miles south of the coastline of modern day Turkey and 70 miles east of Phoenicia lay **the island of Cyprus**. Having an abundance of natural harbors, ships from all over the area would land at Cyprus. **Ships from Asia Minor, Syria, Egypt, and even the land of Israel** would land and exchange goods and culture, as well as customs and religious thought. By the time of the New Testament, the Greco-Roman culture had been firmly planted on this island country and with that the pagan worship of all the gods of Rome. Although there was a population of Jews on the island, **very little if any Jewish influence was ever felt on Cyprus**.

Thirdly, Luke mentions **Antioch**- and we will be looking more at Antioch as we continue through Acts — it actually becomes the center of the Church rather than Jerusalem. But during the time frame we’re looking at here in Acts 11, there were a lot of cities named

¹ Walter A. Elwell and Barry J. Beitzel, “Phoenicia, Phoenician,” *Baker Encyclopedia of the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1988), 1689.

Antioch, but within the context of what we find here in Acts 11, the Antioch we are speaking of would have been Syrian Antioch, also known as Antioch by the River Orontes in the south-eastern area of modern day Turkey.

Built around 300 B.C. by Seleucus Nicator (one of the four generals of Alexander the Great), by the time of the first century, Antioch by the Orontes had become the third largest and most important city in the Roman Empire, surpassed only by Rome and Alexandria.

It was a beautiful city, laid out in the classical Roman style of two main corridors dissecting the city, one going north and south (called the *Cardo Maximus* – taken from the Greek word *kardia*, or “*heart*”), while the other main road ran east and west.

It would be at the **intersection of these two main roads where you would find the Forum or marketplace**. The Forum was the **social hub** of Roman cities, with shops, personal rendezvous, meetings, political discussions and debates, as well as the location of multiples of statues to a variety of deities, both male and female.

Heading away from the Forum – rather it be east, west, north, or south it wouldn't be very far to travel until you would **come face to face with multiple opportunities to take part in every form of depravity and wicked behavior known to man**. The Roman streets were kept impeccably clean, but behind the scenes the filth and depravity of man was on open display. It was here in Antioch where you would find the Temple to Apollo, located in nature reserve dedicated to the goddess Daphne, where both men and women would give way to all *the temptations of wealth and pleasure, not to mention the allure of the cults of Artemis and Apollo*.²

Another writer defines it as *a vile city, with gross immorality and ritual prostitution as part of its temple worship*.³

² Allen C. Myers, *The Eerdmans Bible Dictionary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1987), 61.

³ Stanley D. Toussaint, “Acts,” in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures*, ed. J. F. Walvoord and R. B. Zuck, vol. 2 (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1985), 383.

I wanted to take the time to share the background of these three cities or areas to help you see the spiritual environment surrounding each one. These were what many today would call “*Hard Soil*” or “*Tough Ground*”.

But now, into these spiritual “badlands” comes the Church, Jewish/Christians fleeing persecution. But Luke is quick to let us know, they came with **more of a purpose than just fleeing persecution**, they came *preaching the Word...* but for them, in the **midst of their prejudice**, they limited their evangelism efforts *to the Jews only – and no one else*.

Well, that was their **IDEA**: “*We are Jews who have come to know Jesus of Nazareth as the Messiah of Israel. We will go and help other Jews to learn the same.*”

But God’s plan was much bigger
than the Church’s plan.

Aren’t you glad **that’s always the case?** Our God isn’t limited to the **prejudice and ignorance of religious pride**. You and I can make plans for crusades, outreaches, and evangelistic missions, but God will always have the bigger and better plan.

Luke makes it clear to us that some of the Jewish/Christians fleeing persecution were –
from Cyprus and Cyrene, who, when they had come to Antioch, spoke to the Hellenists, preaching the Lord Jesus. ²¹ And the hand of the Lord was with them, and a great number believed and turned to the Lord.

First of all, normally when we see the word **Hellenist**, we recognize it is speaking of **Jews who have turned to accept the Greek culture...** they’ve become **Hellenized**. But the word here simply *designates the Greek-speaking populace of Antioch, therefore Gentiles in general.*⁴

I believe that in the context of what Luke is writing, here we possibly find some who were with the group of Jewish/Christians, might have been Gentile converts to Judaism before becoming Christian. To them, the contact with other Gentiles wouldn’t have been as odious as for those who were raised and trained as Jews. For them, there would have been a greater understanding that **God can and does work and move in the**

⁴ Grant R. Osborne, “Hellenists,” *Baker Encyclopedia of the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1988), 961.

lives of Gentiles. So, for them it was natural to go and share the love of Jesus with these Gentiles there in Antioch.

Then, wouldn't you know it? God moves and *the hand of the Lord was with them, and a great number (of these Gentiles) believed and turned to the Lord.*

This is an amazing and powerful testimony of God's worldwide plan to have *the everlasting gospel preached to all those who dwell on the earth--to every nation, tribe, tongue, and people* (Rev. 14:6)

I believe those who were Gentile converts to Judaism had already seen and experienced the love and redemption of God **cut across the barriers of religion and prejudice.** When as a Jew they discovered the truth of Jesus of Nazareth being the true Messiah, they fulfilled their conversion and became Believers in Jesus as their Savior. Now these unnamed men have the opportunity to share their faith with Gentile brothers and sisters *and a great number believed and turned to the Lord.*

Don't you love it when we see
God's plans coming together.

Look move on to verse 22

²² Then news of these things came to the ears of the church in Jerusalem, and they sent out Barnabas to go as far as Antioch. ²³ When he came and had seen the grace of God, he was glad, and encouraged them all that with purpose of heart they should continue with the Lord. ²⁴ For he was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and of faith. And a great many people were added to the Lord.

The last time we saw Barnabas was back in chapter 9 as he helped the new convert Saul of Tarsus, get in touch with the Church leadership in Jerusalem. We are going to soon find that God has some very big plans for this man whose name means, **"Son of Encouragement"**.

Barnabas was first introduced to us back in chapter 4. We saw him as a man of unselfish giving, a man who cared for his fellow man; we also saw that he was *of the*

country of Cyprus. Now here in chapter 11 Luke adds to his description and we find that Barnabas was also “*a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and of faith.*”

As he ministers in Antioch *a great many people were added to the Lord*. God is doing something powerful in this very pagan city. None of this would've happened if the Jewish/Christians had continued to feel comfortable in Jerusalem. **God used persecution to shake things up** a bit; to get the Believers to do what He had commanded them: “*...you shall be witnesses to Me in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth* (Acts 1:8).”

As the Lord moved in the hearts of the people in Antioch, and the Church grew, the task for Barnabas grew beyond what he could handle himself. He needed assistance, and there was no one with a greater zeal for the things of the Lord than Saul of Tarsus.

²⁵ Then Barnabas departed for Tarsus to seek Saul. ²⁶ And when he had found him, he brought him to Antioch. So it was that for a whole year they assembled with the church and taught a great many people. And the disciples were first called Christians in Antioch.

Most scholars place the conversion of Saul of Tarsus (or the Apostle Paul) at or about AD 35-36. After spending some time in Damascus following his conversion, he then goes into an area of Arabia for about three years. Coming back to Damascus, his zeal for the Lord Jesus is so intense, the Jews of Damascus try to kill him. He then travels up to Jerusalem and very shortly angers the Jews again and a plot for his murder is put in place. Leaving Jerusalem, he heads to his home city of Tarsus; and depending upon which Bible scholar you read, he remains in the area of Syria and Cilicia preaching the Gospel and growing in his faith for about 4-6 years.

Now, as the Church in Antioch grows, Barnabas travels to Tarsus to find and bring Saul back with him to assist in the ministry there. This would have been about AD 43, about 8 years after Saul's initial conversion.

*So it was that for a whole year they (Barnabas and Saul) assembled with the church and taught a great many people. And the disciples were **first called Christians** in Antioch.*

It was during the time of Barnabas and Saul's ministry there in Antioch that the group they ministered to begin to be mocked by the pagans, as they called them **Christianoi** or **Christianos**. The direct meaning was "**belonging to the party of Christ**" or "**patrons of Christ**".

I like that: Forget about Democrat, Republican, Independent, or Libertarian; I belong to the **party of Christ – and that's how I vote!!**

But the interesting thing is history tells us that for the pagans, it had a heckling or mocking slant, declaring Believers to be "**Little Christs**".

As a matter of fact, there are only two other times the word is used in the New Testament. Once by King Agrippa while the Apostle Paul is on trial in Acts 26

Acts 26:28

Then Agrippa said to Paul, "You almost persuade me to become a Christian (a little Christ)."

You can almost hear the mocking sound of Agrippa's voice.

And the other as the Apostle Peter gives encouragement to those who are being persecuted in 1 Peter 4:16

Yet if anyone suffers as a Christian (a little Christ or as an imitator of Christ), let him not be ashamed, but let him glorify God in this matter.

That's why today **we can take His name proudly as Christians**. Yet, at the same time you need to see there are many places in the world where the past actions of what **was CALLED the Church** has actually brought disparity upon the title of "**Christian**". In those areas many Believers use the phrase, "*I am a follower of Jesus*" or "*I am a disciple of Yeshua Ha-maschiach* (Hebrew: 'Jesus, the Messiah')."

So rather you identify as a Christian, a follower of Jesus, or a disciple of *Yeshua Ha-maschiach*, "*Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven* (Mat. 5:16)."

Let's finish up with verses 27-30

²⁷ And in these days prophets came from Jerusalem to Antioch. ²⁸ Then one of them, named Agabus, stood up and showed by the Spirit that there was going to be a great famine throughout all the world, which also happened in the days of Claudius Caesar. ²⁹ Then the disciples, each according to his ability, determined to send relief to the brethren dwelling in Judea. ³⁰ This they also did, and sent it to the elders by the hands of Barnabas and Saul.

We will see Agabus again later in chapter 21, but for now we see a man, whom we have little or no information about, but that God has blessed with the spiritual gift of prophesy. And God reveals to him through the Holy Spirit that there is going to be a famine throughout the world. We find in the following chapter, that this famine actually hit the Church in Jerusalem fairly hard.

Once again God is **shaking things up** as He allows a famine to become a time of pulling ALL the Churches together to assist the Church in Jerusalem and Judea. These Churches outside of Judea are primarily made up of new Gentile Believers who converted directly to Christianity – not to Judaism – **most of the Christians who had converted from Judaism still didn't accept this as possible**. So these Gentile converts are going to have the opportunity to show their love for the Lord, by caring for and sacrificing for the Church in Jerusalem who, up to this time still doesn't fully accept them.

***Oh, my God works in mysterious ways,
His wonders to perform.***

- Troublesome times,
- Times of spiritual and physical attacks,
- Seasons of major stress and anxiety,
- Being stretched beyond our comfort zones and our capabilities...

Yes, God will and does use all of these things to cause us to **draw closer to Him...** To draw closer in order that we might be **used by Him more completely**, to be more flexible, not encumbered by the things of this world, but with dependence upon Him, His provision, His leading, and His empowerment through the infilling and over flowing work of the Holy Spirit.

Are you going through issues in life today?

Trust in the fact that our God is intimately aware of your pain and your suffering, and perhaps it will be through that time of suffering, as He refines us in that crucible trials that He will show you His glory and use you as a testimony of His mercy and grace.