November 25, 2018

Acts 11:19-30

Brody Holloway

Amen. Thank you, Harry. That was very encouraging. That was such an encouraging word on thanksgiving. I can’t give you the reference but you guys will know the verse that says, “God inhabits the praise of His people.” You’ve heard that. Also, just to go along with what Harry was saying—it doesn’t need anything added to it—I was just sitting there thinking that when I’m giving thanks, what a good reminder that it pushes away negativity and things that are toxic. One of the things that we suffer from as a society and as a culture is just a lack of being thankful for what we’ve got. We are such an entitled culture. I work with teenagers in my day job 365 days a year. The most entitled mindset you will ever meet comes from teenagers—until you meet their parents. Then you realize that it’s a cultural and a societal thing. We think that whatever we have that we deserve more and whatever I’ve got you owe me something beyond that. Boy, if we got what we deserved it would be a bad day, wouldn’t it? It would be a bad day. God is gracious, so we always have something to be thankful for. So, yeah, that was good; thank you, Harry.

A couple of things before we dive into Acts 11. One, you might have noticed that we don’t have a piano player tonight so we didn’t have any keys tonight. That brings me to something that I want you to be thinking about and praying about. We are shorthanded when it comes to people volunteering at church. I think people are scared that if they volunteer that they are going to get stuck in the three-year-old class. People think, “If I volunteer and say ‘use me wherever,’ they will put me straight down in Treehouse Jr.” We won’t do that to you unless that’s where you want to go, but there are always a lot of needs. Right now, we have two people who play keyboard. One of them is sick tonight and the other one is the only person here who can run sound. We could have moved Adam from sound to keys but then nobody could have made it where we could hear what these guys were doing because he has to be in the sound booth. There are always jobs to be done and we need people who can say, “Yeah, train me on the sound stuff,” or we will train you on things where we can utilize your gifts and your commitment to be here. If you are willing to work, other than just show up on Sunday, there is work to be done and we will use you. Don’t freak out and think we are going to make you work Pinwheel both days a week from beginning to end. Seriously, whatever your strengths and desire are we will work with you, but that’s just something to put in your mind.

Let’s get to work. Acts 11, verse 19, let me read the text. We are going to finish chapter 11 tonight so we will read down through verse 30. I hope y’all did have an awesome Thanksgiving week. It’s my favorite holiday. I was talking with Jeff Taylor before church and I was telling him how it’s my favorite holiday all year. I don’t know why, it just always has been. I think it’s because it’s a true, long weekend. I was absolutely stupid, sorry, ridiculous all day Friday and I did nothing. I was in my sock feet most of the day, watching football and then topping the day off with a family viewing of *A Christmas Story*. It’s that season, and I love Thanksgiving, but it’s good to be back with God’s people in the house of the Lord tonight, just to study God’s Word together. I’m excited about the text. Another thing is, on a week where I had five days off from my day job, I spent a lot of time in this text, probably four times as much as I normally do, so I’m going to preach for about ninety minutes. I’m just kidding. Don’t freak out and don’t leave; I’m not going to do that to you.

Alright, verse 19,

Now those who were scattered because of the persecution that arose over Stephen traveled as far as Phoenicia and Cyprus and Antioch, speaking the word to no one except Jews. 20 But there were some of them, men of Cyprus and Cyrene, who on coming to Antioch spoke to the Hellenists also, preaching the Lord Jesus.

We are just going to walk through the text tonight. Something interesting is happening. In verse 18, there is this word ‘scattered.’ Here’s what’s happened. You might remember, starting with the persecution of Stephen, the Church got scattered. If we go back a few chapters, there was a guy named Stephen who was the first martyr. He was the first person to ever die for the faith. So, Stephen was preaching the Gospel and proclaiming Christ and he was killed for it. God used that execution of Stephen to scatter people, so people ran in fear but they ran with purpose. So, God moved. What happened is that all the Christians were huddling in one place. If you go all the way back to the night after Jesus was murdered, they are all together, then after Jesus’ resurrection they are all together. Then, after Jesus’ ascension they are all together. But Jesus had made a promise and here’s what the promise was—“I’m going to take you people who are gathered here and I’m going to spread you across the world and you are going to take the Gospel to the ends of the Earth,” which at that time was the Roman Empire. You can go do your research and go see what the Roman Empire encompassed but He said, “I’m going to use you to reach the Roman Empire.” Then, it is handed down to us to, in fact, reach the entire planet. Global missions is what we are all about. So, in that generation they are going to reach the nations with the Gospel. They are going to reach the different people groups, people from different backgrounds, and people from different places. So, Jesus had told these people, “This is what I’m going to do. I’m going to empower you and then we are going to go and reach the world.” Then they all huddled together in Jerusalem. They were like, “We’re going to reach the world,” but then they huddled together in Jerusalem. So, God has a way, sometimes uncomfortably, of getting out of us what He wants out of us. It’s always very gracious and God always has a purpose in what He does, but He uses persecution to drive people out of Jerusalem. So, everybody was in Jerusalem where they were killing people who were Christians. So, if you were a Christian and you were in Jerusalem and you knew that they were going to kill you, what do you do? You leave Jerusalem. They might be, “I have a cousin who lives in Cyprus,” or “I have some relatives that are all the way out in Spain and I’ve never even met them but I’m going to travel there.” So, Christians started to go throughout the world to get away from the persecution in Jerusalem. In doing that, they are fulfilling what Jesus had said, “I’m going to empower you and send you throughout the world.”

So, they started to go throughout the world. Now, when they go throughout the world, what they do is that they initially go to these new places and share the Gospel with Jews, because Jesus had come as the Messiah of the Jews. So, they go to Jewish people and they tell the story of the Gospel. Then, Jewish converts, people who were Jewish in their religion and converted to Christianity, start to follow Christ and they become the first people reached with the Gospel. Then, from there, they begin to reach non-Jews. So, when it speaks of those who were scattered because of persecution, that’s the context. Stephen gets killed and the Christians begin to be scattered because if they stay where they are they are all going to get killed.

Remember, we talked about this. We said that when Paul fled persecution that wasn’t a cowardice act. It was a smart act. Stay alive so you can preach another day. So, the Christians were sort of like on an adventure in the first century. They were on the run because if they went over here the Romans would kill them, if they went over there the Jews would kill them, if they went up here the barbarians would kill them, literal barbarians. So, they are running all over the place but what happens is that as they are running they are proclaiming the Gospel as far as Phoenicia, and Cyprus, and Antioch, and Antioch is the city we are going to look at tonight.

Speaking the word to no one except Jews.

So, they scatter and they tell the Jewish people. It’s like you run to this city called Antioch and you get there and you are like, “I’ll go to the Jews. They’re my friends. That’s our parent religion.” The Jews have also been persecuted by the Romans, so they go to the Jews and they tell them, “Hey, the Messiah came,” so there’s a movement of the Church. But then watch this. Here’s what happens. Somebody gets out of the box. Verse 20,

But there were some of them, men of Cyprus and Cyrene, who on coming to Antioch spoke to the Hellenists also, preaching the Lord Jesus.

What are Hellenists? If you look down in the footnotes of your Bible it probably says Greeks. These were non-Jews. So, you have these guys that say, “Oh, we’re going to tell the Gospel to the Jews, but we are also going to tell the Gospel to people who are not Jews.” Remember, the Jewish faith has given way and it’s had its place in history but it’s given way for the Christian faith, which is for all people. What Jesus did is He came along and said, “There is no sacred place. The Gospel is for everybody.” It’s for everybody.

I wonder if you ever heard a missionary story—I can’t tell you the names of the people but it’s a very familiar story. It just came to my mind right now so it’s not in my notes but these guys basically went and lived among plantation slaves in the Caribbean and worked in the sugar cane fields so that they might share the Gospel with those slaves. Have you ever heard that story? They went to those people. Nobody was going to those people and these guys were burdened. They were living in Western civilization in the 1800s and were living in as good of conditions as you could be living in and they thought, “Who is going to go tell these slaves in the Caribbean about Jesus?” The slave owners aren’t going to tell them the true Gospel because the true Gospel would say you can’t own slaves. Right? So, they aren’t going to do it. Now, we know that there was a distorted view of Christianity where a lot of slave owners would have church services and teach the Bible but they weren’t really giving them the Gospel. So, these guys went there, and there is one story—and I think this is more folklore—where they sold themselves into slavery. But what I’ve heard more recently is that they said, “We are going to go down there and as white Europeans or white Americans we can move freely among the slaves,” and they basically went down there and devoted their lives to these slaves. Isn’t that a powerful picture of missions? To go live among people who otherwise are not going to get the Gospel?

So, you have these men who are from Cyprus and Cyrene and they go to Antioch and they don’t go to the Jews. This was groundbreaking because everyone had only gone to the Jews. Not these guys, they go to the Greeks, the non-Jews. In modern context, they would go to India and minister to the Hindus but they’d also minister to Muslims and Buddhists. They would go to Africa and minister to pagans. They wouldn’t look at a certain people group but they would just say, “We are going to go and we are going to watch the Gospel spread like wildfire.” Just like Christians were being scattered across the Earth, they were saying, “Wherever we go, let’s take the Gospel to those people.”

And the hand of the Lord was with them, and a great number who believed turned to the Lord. 22 The report of this came to the ears of the church in Jerusalem, and they sent Barnabas to Antioch.

Okay, so here is the status of the Church. Here’s what’s going on. These guys from Cyrene go to Antioch and they start to share the Gospel with non-Jews, like people in the marketplace. They are just doing life with people in day-to-day life. This is what evangelism looks like. You are sharing Christ with people you meet on a daily basis that you work alongside of. We have many people in our church who work at the casino and it is always interesting talking to casino workers who see that as a mission field and who are united in that mission to reach those people with the Gospel. I bring that up because it’s one of the larger employers in this area. This is like workplace missions, and students in school who are on mission, and many of us with family members who are not Christians. We are just looking for opportunities to share the Gospel and looking for opportunities to tell people about Jesus. That’s what these guys were about. They were looking for opportunities to tell people about Jesus and God was working through their faithfulness. God was working through their obedience so people were coming to faith in Jesus. In fact, this is a whole lot of people. Look at what it says in verse 21, “a great number.” Luke will use that phrase often. It means a whole lot. It means a lot of people.

I am thankful that God has planted Red Oak Church and has grown Red Oak Church from about a dozen people to now a lot more than that. I don’t know; we don’t take roll but a lot more than a dozen people. This is even a down night because it’s Thanksgiving weekend and a lot of people aren’t back. God has grown the church. We’re not about numbers but wouldn’t it be cool if God grew Red Oak to about 500 in a town of 1600, with a neighboring town of Robbinsville with a couple thousand or a little bit more than that. Murphy is a few thousand. There is room for us to grow. Wouldn’t it be cool if God would use the personal witness of our people to reach other people with the Gospel and the church would grow? That’s what was happening in Antioch. So, people were coming to faith in Jesus and people were being faithful to share the Gospel with others.

This past week, we were talking with some family members who work in the medical profession. One is a PA and the other works in financial counseling and consulting. They live down in Savannah. They are godly people who love the Lord and who are faithful in their church. They listen to the Red Oak podcast. They are good people and we love them dearly. We were talking about families we’ve ministered to and people we’ve ministered to who are the victims of abuse and we just started telling stories. Do you ever start telling stories? We were telling stories about this kid who was trafficked sexually in Atlanta and we were talking about the need for people to go into dark places. Then, we started talking about the drug scene in rural America and the drug scene in urban America. We were just kind of telling stories and at one point this gal said, “I’ve definitely been living under a rock or in a bubble, because I know the people at my church, and the people at my work, and I see my patients as patients, but I didn’t realize this stuff went on.” She was in the conversation and was in shock at the stories that for me are just everyday stories and everyday occurrences. Some of you are in a world where you interact with people on a daily basis who need Jesus. People need Jesus.

What are these guys doing? Listen to how it describes their mission. Verse 19,

Now those who were scattered because of the persecution that arose over Stephen traveled as far as Phoenicia and Cyprus and Antioch, speaking the word to no one except Jews.

Basically, they were just speaking the Word to the Jews and then, in verse 20,

But there were some of them, men of Cyprus and Cyrene, who on coming to Antioch spoke to the Hellenists also, preaching the Lord Jesus. 21 And the hand of the Lord was with them, and a great number who believed turned to the Lord. 22 The report of this came to the ears of the church in Jerusalem, and they sent Barnabas to Antioch. 23 When he came and saw the grace of God, he was glad, and he exhorted them all to remain faithful to the Lord with steadfast purpose, 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 Church keeps growing. Barnabas shows up and the Church keeps growing.

So Barnabas went to Tarsus to look for Saul, 26 and when he had found him, he brought him to Antioch. For a whole year they met with the church and taught a great many people. And in Antioch the disciples were first called Christians.

Here’s what’s interesting about this evangelistic movement. People are coming to faith in Jesus because other people, just in their day-to-day lives, are sharing Christ. This is not like a big missional push. It’s not like one church over in this town said, “Let’s put a team together and send them to this city to go on mission.” This was just Christians living out Christianity and people came to faith in Jesus, and it made such an impact that all the way down in Jerusalem they heard about it. Now, why would they have heard about it, specifically in Antioch? Here’s why. Antioch was the third largest city in the world. What are the largest cities now? Probably Beijing, Tokyo, New York City, LA… Let’s just stay in America. It goes New York, LA, Houston, then maybe Chicago; does that sound right? So, we’re talking in modern context about a city the size of Chicago where there is no Christian witness. In Cargill, there are estimated to be between 250,000 to 450,000 people and we are doing work there, but it’s not in the city but rather in a broad, broad, remote area of villages with one city and some smaller cities. Well, Antioch was a city of a half million people. By ancient city standards that was a big city.

By today’s standards that’s a big city, isn’t it? Think about where you live. A half million people is something like Chattanooga. Is Chattanooga a big city, to us? Yeah. If you grew up in Chicago, Miami, Tampa, Charlotte, or any of the Atlanta bedroom communities, you might say Chattanooga is a nice little town. No, no, no…that’s booming, that’s banging, that’s happening. There’s Starbucks on this corner, Zaxby’s on this corner, and a movie theatre with more than two screens—that’s a big city. There is something to be said for being on mission in the city. In fact, I remember years ago hearing a preacher describe ministry to the cities as “trickle-down ministry,” because he said that culture starts in the cities and then it trickles to the small towns. Look, Robbinsville doesn’t set local culture. Murphy, as cool as kids in Murphy can be, are not establishing global teenage culture. People in LA and Houston are not following the example of people in Andrews, right? Is it the reverse? Yeah, it’s the reverse. Cities establish culture. Cities impact smaller towns, smaller cities, and entire nations.

So, city ministry is critical. That’s why you will often hear us talk about people who go out of this ministry, out of Red Oak, and that’s where they’re going. Blue and Britt just went to N’Djamena. That’s a big city with a lot of need and a lot of people. We have people who have served in Mumbai. Talk to some people and they will say that Mumbai is about 15 million people and when you talk to other people they will say it’s about 23 million. I’ve been there and I’m going to lean on 23 million. I feel like every human on planet Earth, outside of this county, lives in Mumbai when I’m there. And the average height is about 5’6” so I’m the white guy who is a head above everybody else who is getting stared at constantly. I’m friendly and I’m their friend but everybody thinks I’m in the military. The only thing worse is to tell them you’re a Baptist, or a Protestant, or a Methodist, or a Presbyterian, evangelical Christian from America. You thought it was bad when you were military. But the cities are where ministry has to happen because the city is where global impact is going to happen most. That doesn’t mean we are going to neglect small towns, does it? No, man, we want to plant churches in small towns. We want to reach those villages in Cargill and we want to plant churches in Bryson City and the surrounding areas, because there’s a need to reach people in those communities.

So, if you did any background reading this week, the two cities that were bigger than Antioch were Rome—I don’t know if you’ve studied much but Rome was kind of a big deal in that day, wasn’t it? The Roman Empire is where it all started. Then, the next one was Alexandria. I haven’t studied much about Alexandria but it was bigger than Antioch and those were the only two. Some people say Ephesus was bigger but most people agree that Antioch was larger. They worshipped this goddess named Daphne. That’s all they could come up with. You’ve got Thor, Apollo, Zeus—and Daphne. That’s a Scooby Doo character. But they worshipped this goddess named Daphne and here’s the way the deal with Daphne worked. In Greek mythology, there was a god named Apollo who pursued Daphne and it was a sexual pursuit. In pagan cities, oftentimes during holiday days or holy days they would emulate or imitate what their gods do. So, in our day, you will think of certain cities that have religious days where they are doing something that appeases their god. In Hindu, there are places where worshippers will do bathing rituals in certain rivers to please the gods. They draw that from certain things that their gods have done. They believe their gods have made certain waters holy by bathing in those waters so people will go bathe in those waters to simulate what their gods have done. Have you ever heard about that? If not, there’s a lot of information out there you can study and it’s really fascinating. So, in Antioch the religious culture there produced a lot of religious prostitutes that were called priestesses and they were recognized as holy women. Priestesses had authority in the church in Antioch and the men of the city would pay money to do this role playing thing that was supposed to represent Apollo pursuing Daphne and it would end in a consummation in a religious and sacred ritual. That’s very dark, isn’t it? But the reality is that no culture that is really worldly is going to be sexually pure. Always, when you have dark, pagan things happening, sexual perversion is going to be a part of it, right? Always. Antioch would be like places in Thailand where they refer to sexual vacations, because there is such a vast opportunity for people to go there and pay for prostitutes. Or think about a place like Las Vegas. I’ve never been to Las Vegas but I talked to somebody recently who had been to Las Vegas on a business trip and they said that, literally, there are business cards for call girl services just like you would see business cards for realtors on display in restaurants and other places they went.

So, the first, big, non-Jewish church was established in what some people believe was the darkest, most pagan city in the ancient Roman world. Do you know why? Because the Gospel light shines brightest in the darkest places. And persecution is driving this. So, these people are rolling in there and they’ve been persecuted. Do you think they’re focused? Yes, because persecution has a cleansing effect. In America, here’s what happens. In America, people will say, “Yeah, I’m a Christian.” I talk to young people a lot, “Are you a Christian?” “Yeah, I’m a Christian.” But I don’t think they are Christians. I think that, oftentimes, people you work with will say, “Yes, I’m a Christian.” I remember being in India one time, or maybe it was in Africa, but we were talking about faith and I said, “I’m a Christian.” This is when I realized that saying ‘Christian’ wasn’t the best way to communicate something to somebody. This person said they knew I was a Christian because I was from America and everyone is a Christian in America. I said, “Oh, yeah? Who are some famous Christians you know?” This person named Brittney Spears and LeBron James. These were the two famous American Christians this guy told me. I’m not here to judge Brittney Spears and LeBron James but I thought there are some other people we could use as national representatives of what the Christian faith looks like, right? You go to a society where religion and society are merged, like, “Because I am of this people group in India it automatically then follows that I’m Hindu,” or “Because I’m from this Latin American country it automatically follows that I’m Catholic.” Because you are from America, eighty present of the world assumes that you’re Christian, because they take that word and they attach it to a society or a culture.

So, let’s keep reading. In Antioch, that’s where the word even came from. Verse 27,

Now in these days prophets came down from Jerusalem to Antioch. 28 And one of them named Agabus stood up and foretold by the Spirit that there would be a great famine over all the world (this took place in the days of Claudius). 29 So the disciples determined, every one according to his ability, to send relief to the brothers living in Judea. 30 And they did so, sending it to the elders by the hand of Barnabas and Saul.

What is happening is that you are starting to see these moving parts all over the Roman Empire where the Christian Church is everywhere, but it says that it’s in Antioch that they call them Christians. What were they called before that? They called themselves disciples or believers. If you ever notice, as we’ve studied up to this point in Acts, disciples and believers are the words that would be used. In fact, most people think that the word ‘Christian’ was a mongrel name, because the word itself is not even all from one language.[[1]](#footnote-1) It recognizes the Jewish Messiah and then a follower of that Messiah, but part of the word is Hebrew and part of the word is Greek, or part of the word is Greek and part of the word is Latin; do your homework on that because I forgot that. But it was a mongrel word and most people think it was either to make fun of them or that it was a derogatory word, so to be called a Christian in Antioch was really not like they were trying to give you a compliment. But what was happening is that the Christian faith was growing at such a rate that it was no longer recognized as a Jewish religion but it was becoming its own movement and the Church was having an impact in the city. The Church of Jesus Christ was having a major impact in the city of Antioch.

People didn’t say, “I’m a Christian because I’m from the Bible Belt.” We were driving home this morning from visiting some family for Thanksgiving and we were down in Georgia. It was fascinating. Do you ever get out on a Sunday morning? Talk about out of the box—we meet on Sundays at 6pm. That’s like wearing flip-flops to church. If you showed up to church in Antioch they were probably meeting in homes. Over here they were meeting at ten on Sunday and over here they were meeting at six on Sunday. Somebody asked me recently, “Now what time do y’all start?” and I said, “Six.” He said, “Six in the morning?!” and I said, “No, six in the evening. Nobody would go to church at six in the morning.” He said, “I mean, church is on Sunday mornings,” and I was like, “We are kind of like those folks at Antioch, we are breaking molds. Plus, we don’t have a church building.” Maybe some of you can remember an experience where you were at a church when you were growing up or some time before you came here and something happened, like they went to a contemporary service, or the preacher stopped wearing a tie, or they added a guitar or a drum, and it really shook people up. Why? Because we like to create boxes and stay inside of them. We like to create lanes and run inside of those lanes. In Antioch, there were no lanes and there were no boxes, so the danger then was that the Church would grow with zeal, but as Paul would later say to the Romans, but not in accordance with knowledge, so we have to send some good teachers up there.

So, they sent Barnabas from Jerusalem. Now, the people in Jerusalem were freaking out because they heard that the Gospel was going to non-Jews. “Whoa, whoa, whoa, we need to send somebody up there.” So, they send Barnabas because I think they recognized what it says, that he was a good man. This is the only time this word is used to describe somebody in Acts. He’s a good man. Barnabas was a man of integrity. His family roots were from one of these cities where these people were from, so he came from a non-Jewish context and he appreciated the work that was going on among the Gentiles. He was also an encourager and he was very selfless. We know he was very selfless because when he got up there and saw the work that was going on, the Church was growing and crazy things were happening, and he was like, “We don’t want to slow this down and we don’t want to rein this in but we do need to disciple these people well.” See, good mission endeavor is always going to include good preaching, good teaching, and good discipleship. Because you can get somebody excited about Jesus but you’ve got to put a root system down. So, Barnabas was such an example for us because guess what he does? He sends for Saul.

Now, this is interesting. Where is Saul? Saul is in Tarsus. What’s Tarsus? It was his home town. Remember? So, where has Saul been in the story? This is ten years after we last saw Saul. Saul would become the Apostle Paul. Remember that the first Christian who came alongside of him, and encouraged him, and helped him was Barnabas. So, they send Barnabas to Antioch.

So, let’s get up to speed here. We are looking at this city of Antioch, where the Church is growing and people are putting their faith in Jesus. There are so many of them in this dark, Las Vegas-like city, that they get their own name and they start calling them Christians. They are light in the darkness. They are impacting the city but there’s no real leadership. They need leadership so they send Barnabas up there because he’s such a faithful servant-follower of Jesus. Barnabas gets there and he is in a prime position to lead one of the largest church movements in the world ever in history and what does he do? He sends for Saul. There is a good lesson here because Barnabas is recognizing that he needs someone whose strengths will play to the situation and Barnabas is not interested in being the hero of the day. He just wants much to be made of Jesus. He wants Jesus to grow the church.

That’s why you’ll see, if you come to church at Red Oak for a month, or two, or three, you’ll see multiple people preach and you will see multiple people lead worship. Maybe, for some of you, when you first started coming here you may have even gotten a little confused about who the pastor is because we have multiple people in leadership.

So, Barnabas sends for Saul. Why would he do that? Barnabas is the encourager. He’s nice. Barnabas is the guy that everybody liked to be around. Have you ever been around somebody who is just encouraging? We have people like that in our church. There are a lot of guys and gals in this church where I’m like, “I like to see that person come. They’re probably going to say nice things and be encouraging. John Ragon is always nice after church. He tells me he appreciates the sermon. I always like to run into Chris Woods in town. He’s really nice. Harry is a very nice person. There are others—I’m not saying it’s only those three. There are people who are just really friendly. When I leave that person I feel very encouraged. Then, there are other people who are just not encouragers. They love Jesus, they love people, they love you but they are not encouragers. That was Paul. Paul exhorts and encourages, but when we study Paul, the man, what was he all about? Good doctrine, confronting sin, building a theological framework for the Church, and making sure they were discipling people. He would confront people to their faces. He would call a spade a spade. He was like a bull in a china shop. And where has he been for the last ten years? Losing everything. In Philippians 3:8, he says, “I lost everything and I count it joy for Christ.” He went back to Tarsus and his family turned on him. Many of you, when you came to faith in Jesus or answered the call to ministry or missions, your family was like, “Nope. We’re done. We’re out.”

Paul has been there. Paul lost everything. He lost status in the Jewish church. He lost status in the Gentile church. I don’t know what he’s been doing for ten years but the Lord has been grooming him and raising him up, and whatever he’s been doing he has been faithful doing it. Paul spent ten years, really thirteen years, in complete obscurity, and Barnabas was like, “I know the guy for the job.” It’s like Moses. Many of you were here when we went through the book of Exodus. Moses was out in the wilderness for eighty years. For forty years he was in Egypt with a silver spoon in his mouth and then the next forty years he was a shepherd in the middle of the wilderness and nobody was paying attention. And a lot of Christians, on a normal day, feel like, “I’m not making an impact. Nobody knows what I’m about. What am I doing? My life is not meaningful. What difference am I making?” Well, Saul spent thirteen years and I don’t know what he was doing but he was growing closer to the Lord, he was worshipping Jesus, he was studying the Scripture, he was praising and giving thanks, and he was telling those around him about Jesus. Now, Barnabas is like, “I know a guy that I think is the right guy for this job,” and he sends for Saul, and they spend the next year bringing those people together and finding a balance to where they are continuing to fan the flame of the Gospel in that city but they are giving those people good, theological training; helping them know more about who Jesus is, know more about who God is, and know more about Heaven, and Hell, and theology, which is the understanding of who God is, and the Gospel, and the need to reach people. Knowing what it looks like to form and build a church in a movement of churches in the city—that’s what they do, and they spend the next year doing that. What an incredible tandem—Barnabas and Saul—and they become teammates. We will see more of them down the road. They even have a falling out at one point, because they’re human and that’s what happens. But right here it’s this beautiful picture of this unity in the Church.

So, they spend a year raising people up and then the story sort of winds down in those last few verses, starting in verse 27, and what happens there is really cool. What happens is that there is what we would call an international crisis or a national crisis. We’ve had a couple of recent catastrophes in our nation. One is the fires in California. Has anybody studied what it was like as far as the vastness of those fires? Remember when we had forest fires here a couple of years ago? We had a large area of our geographic territory that was burning. Remember the smoke? They called school off. You couldn’t go outside. You couldn’t see from here to the Snowbird Mountain Range because it was so hazy, and we weren’t even burning in this valley right here. Nantahala Gorge was burning. Parts of Nantahala community were burning. The fires that they had out west were burning areas as large as from here to Asheville, I think. It was a whole massive, gigantic section. People were dying. And what has our nation done? They’ve sent help. What do churches do? They send help.

When we had the hurricanes this past September, I think I told y’all, I went to Wyoming. Whenever I would see somebody and they would ask, “Where are you from, Texas?”—because if you have a southern accent out west they just think you’re from Texas, I’d say, “No, I’m from North Carolina,” and they’d say, “Oh, how are you guys doing with the hurricane?” I’d be like, “You know, honestly, it didn’t even hit us.” People don’t understand the geography of the state and how far out here we are. I would meet folks and they’d say, “We sent some people over there to work.” That’s goodwill and humanity. Well, who started that? The Church started it. The Red Cross didn’t start it. Human governments didn’t start it. You know, the Roman government didn’t send aid to hurricane victims. Do you know what they did? They drove up the cost of food in a hurricane-ravaged area and that’s how they weeded out the weak of society so that only the wealthier could be sustained. Do you know what the Church did? They said, “Let’s send food and money down there so that we can help the believers impact their community.” That’s what we do when we send resources to our missionaries on the field in dark and hard places. We are helping people.

So, they were starting to see this global shift to where the Church was global. The work of the Gospel was spreading to cities and far-reaching regions and they were reaching across borders and helping each other, and they were sending money down to the elders in this church, or taking the money and figuring out how to distribute it among the poor people and those who had been ravaged by famine. It was this powerful picture where in Antioch, the third largest city in the world, the Gospel is spreading through the city and people are being discipled, and trained, and raised up, and given the Word of God, and taught how to worship Christ effectively, and how to care about their neighbor and reach them. Then, they are taking their money and resources and they are sending it to people who are hurting in other places and you are seeing this powerful movement that literally again, as the book of Acts progresses—we are going to keep saying this and we’ve already been saying it a lot—history is being shifted every week that we study. All of a sudden, now, you see that the Church is no longer a Jewish thing. It’s a Gentile-Greek thing. It’s like you are black, you are white, it doesn’t matter; you are Asian, you’re African, you’re what would become modern day European, and it doesn’t matter. The Gospel is for you. It doesn’t matter—the Gospel is for you. The Gospel is for all people. What’s going on in Antioch and what’s going on in the Roman world at that time is the equivalent of white people in the South taking the Gospel to plantation slaves in the 1840s and 1850s. It’s unprecedented, because that’s what the Gospel does; it erases borders and lines.

Luke records that the people in Antioch began to call them Christians. And I want to take a minute in our closing to say that when we call ourselves Christians and we think of ourselves as believers, I think it’s important that we challenge ourselves with the Scripture to look at what Scripture says a Christian is. In John 8, Jesus says, “If you’re my disciples you will abide in my Word, or my Scriptures.” That means you will hang onto the Word of God. If I call myself a Christian, then something that Jesus is saying will be evident and will be true, is that I’ll hold fast to the Word of God. I’ll get a hold of it and hang onto it. There may be seasons where I don’t do that, right? Do you ever have a season like that, where you’re spiritually blah or in a dead place? But the overarching trajectory of your life will be that if you call yourself a Christian you will love the Word of God. Period. Who said it? Jesus. There’s an authoritative voice there. Right? “If you’re my disciples you will abide in my Word. You will hold fast to my teaching.” He goes on in John 8 and says that when you do that, that will bring you freedom. The Christian experiences freedom that nobody in the world experiences—freedom from social pressure, freedom from identity crisis. I don’t mean that you don’t struggle with those things but ultimately you have freedom over those things as defining characteristics. He also says that true Christians will love Jesus. They will love the Word of God and they will obey Scripture. In John 8, Jesus lays it out for us. He’s like, “If you’re my disciples”—and in Antioch they would say, “If you’re a Christian,”—here are your characteristics; you will love the Scripture, you will love the God of the Scripture, you’ll love Jesus, you’ll obey Him, you’ll worship Him, you’ll follow Him, and you’ll proclaim the Gospel to other people.

So, what we are left with at the end of this text are three huge ideas to walk away with. The first one is there in verses 21-24, and it’s that the mission of the Church is empowered by God. The mission of the Church is empowered by God. So, the reason that we do anything we do as a Church, whether it’s local ministry or international ministry—because we do both—why? Because that’s empowered by God. Why is the Church in Antioch growing? Because God used persecution to scatter Christians and to drive people into Antioch who were not Jewish Christians. He was scattering them out. So the mission of the Church is empowered by God.

Number two. The mission of the Church is carried out by godly preaching. Godly preaching is going to be central to missionary endeavors—the proclamation of the Gospel and the teaching of disciples. Jesus said, “Go make disciples,” so godly preaching is critical. The preaching of the Gospel is central in any Church movement.

Number three. The mission of the Church is assisted by the unity and solidarity of the believers in all the churches. In other words, we are unified. Presbyterian, Assemblies of God, Methodist—we are going to have some disagreements, and there are those that we have big enough disagreements with that we would say that we are not on the same team. But when it comes to evangelical denominations there are divisions that go all the way back to the Early Church, but when Christ is proclaimed as “the way, the truth, and the life, and no one comes to the Father” but by Him, we can start there and work through the core tenets of the Gospel—the death, burial, resurrection, and work of Jesus. We are on the same team and there is unity and solidarity in the Church. Last week, Spencer preached at the community Thanksgiving service, which was held at the Lutheran Church with people from about four different denominations there. But also, we are going to join hands with people in other countries. What should unity in the Church look like? Unity in the local body. We should really care about each other, and be unified while we do it, and make a difference in this community. And remember this sort of overarching idea—that there is no greater honor than to be called a Christian because it literally means ‘little Christ’ or ‘Christ-follower.’ Little Christ or Christ-follower.

I have to end with what may be the oldest preacher story in the book. It’s the second sermon illustration I ever remember hearing. The first one I remember hearing as a Christian, and I’ve heard it about a dozen times since then. You guys have heard this story where there was a man in Alexander the Great’s army and this man’s name was Alexander. Have you heard this story? This man ran away from the conflict in the field of battle and he was captured. He was brought before Alexander as a coward and an abandoner. Alexander the Great says, “They tell me your name is Alexander. Is that true?” and the man says, “Yes, my name is Alexander.” The king said, “You need to change your name or start acting like you’re part of this army.” That’s a story that’s often been told to say, “You know what? Being a Christian literally means that even by my name I represent Christ. Christ has given me His name. I’m a little Christ. I’m a Christ-follower. Christ is in me. So I need to live like it and it’s a great honor to get to do that.” Amen?

Let’s pray.

Lord, I pray that as we close your Word physically right now that we wouldn’t close it spiritually, mentally, in our hearts and in our minds and that we would go home with these truths, and dwell on them, and imagine what has happened there in Antioch, and that would impact the way that we live our lives this week. Thank you for the work you’re doing through Red Oak Church in these communities that we are all a part of, in the tri-county area, and even over into Swain County. And I thank you for the work that you’re doing in places like West Virginia through the Clodfelters at Chestnut Mountain Ranch, and the work that you’re doing with partner churches in other places that we’ve been able to assist and help in the work of local ministry. I thank you for what you’re doing and I pray that we would be a church on mission and that we would do our part in our generation so that when we die and are forgotten that the Gospel will have been carried, proclaimed, and passed to the next generation, and broadened in its impact and its scope. We love you and worship you because you’re worthy. In Jesus’ name, Amen.

1. The Greek word Χριστιανός (Christianos), meaning "follower of Christ", comes from Χριστός (Christos), meaning "anointed one", with an adjectival ending borrowed from Latin to denote adhering to, or even belonging to, as in slave ownership. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)