

Acts: 11:19-26

May 9, 2021

Gandalf was right when he offered this sage bit of advice to his young friend, Frodo.

“It’s a dangerous business, Frodo, going out your door. You step on the road, and if you don’t keep you feet, there’s no knowing where you might be swept off to.” J.R.R. Tolkien

Last week, we started thinking together about this dangerous business of going out. We have purposed to remember together a few things so that we might not get swept off to places we don’t want to go. Our lives—in some ways—were put on pause and we got to evaluate our passions and our priorities.

As followers of Jesus, our passions and priorities are going to be different than others. Last week, we remembered that we all need each other. This week, we go together to Syria and the bustling ancient metropolis of Antioch. We will be witnesses to a pivotal moment in history.

We are going to remember together something we already know. Last week we remembered—we need each other. This week, we remember the lost need to be saved.

PROP: Make it clear to everyone that Jesus is the core of who you are.

“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. 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. ²⁵ 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.” Acts 11:19-26

PRAY

1. Make it Clear: Preach the Lord Jesus

When it comes to sharing the gospel of Jesus Christ we can be tempted to wait for the perfect circumstances. But that is not

how life goes. We don't get perfect circumstances, we just have ordinary circumstances.

This is what happened in Antioch.

To understand what happened in Antioch, you need to understand what happened in Jerusalem a few years prior. Luke references the events of Acts 7, a few chapters earlier.

At that time there was only one city with Christians—Jerusalem. And in that city there was only one kind of Christian—Jewish Christians. One of these Jewish Christians was named Stephen. He made waves by debating with Jewish leaders. In the course of things, Stephen was called before the ruling body and his preaching of the gospel so enraged them, that on masse they drug him outside the city and killed him. His death came one rock at a time.

The death of Stephen emboldened Jews to persecute Christians, and that day the Jews decided to stop debating and start hunting, beating, and imprisoning Christians.

The persecution was so stout that the very first Christian church was scattered in dozens of directions from Jerusalem. Like a daffodil, the wind of persecution scattered these saints all over the known world. Stephen's execution was tragic—the scattering of the church catastrophic. It might seem that this little fledgling flame of Christianity would be snuffed out and be little more than a footnote in history.

Nope.

Why not? In part because of unnamed saints. Look at vs. 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.

Do you see what happened?

This great scattering led to a greater gathering.

These were not the ideal circumstances for evangelism—but they were their circumstances. So, as they fled persecution, they told people about Jesus. Surely, they would have been struggling with all the events in Jerusalem, but as they scattered, they spoke of the Lord Jesus.

But then as a second wave of dispersed Christians came to Antioch, something unexpected happened—

Vs. 20,

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.

That might seem like a small thing, but it is hard to overstate how big of a deal this is. Unknown saints came to Antioch and “preached the Lord Jesus” to Gentiles. For the first time,

Gentiles en mass would hear about this Jewish Messiah was Lord of all.

Make no mistake, there were not ideal circumstances, the city they were in was thoroughly pagan. They had no idea who Jesus was and no notion of the God of the Old Testament. They had no Old Testament. The city knew nothing of God but those who were scattered did, and they told others.

What happened?

Vs. 21,

²¹ And the hand of the Lord was with them, and a great number who believed turned to the Lord.

For the first time, the message of Jesus transcended a racial and cultural barrier. These Christians Jews spoke to Greek speaking Gentiles. They spoke of Jesus as “the Lord” not “a lord.” All of the people they spoke to were from races and cultures that served lords. They all had regional gods that a whole people would revere.

But Jesus was different.

His realm was not the Nile Delta or the Lycus Valley or the Seven Hills but the universe. And this universal Lord had come to his rebellious creation not to punish them, but to save them. This Lord became a man and was destroyed by men for the sins

of all mankind. No other religion has a system of destroying sin through means of destroying its Lord.

Those scattered were able to say that this Lord proved that his sacrifice was accepted by rising from the dead. And he is worth following. And the Gentiles became Christians.

These were not ideal circumstances, but they spoke of Jesus. The reason that they were successful was not because they were clever but because—

Vs. 21,

²¹ And the hand of the Lord was with them

We need to make the core of who we are clear and preach Jesus to those we come in contact with. We cannot afford to wait for the perfect circumstances. If you wait until you feel ready to share Christ with someone, you will never be ready.

Maybe questions swirl for you like: What if they ask a question that you cannot answer? What if they hate me? What if I don't know what to say?

Think about our ancient unnamed brothers and sisters in Christ—think about what they knew and what they testified to. All they knew was that Jesus saved them from death and hell and they were different people. And they had sat under the apostles teaching.

They didn't have a New Testament; they are IN the New Testament.

If I had to choose between being in the New Testament and having the New Testament, I would rather have the New Testament. Yet, the Lord was with them and people believed.

Think also about what our forbearers of Jesus did—they crossed the racial barriers with the message of Jesus. Instead of saying—they are so different than me, they will never believe. They don't want to hear from me. But they crossed over and took their message with them.

In Antioch, there were at least 18 different ethnic quarters, and each of those sections maintained their own cultures and gods. Records indicate there were people in Antioch from Persia with their Persian gods. There were people from India with their gods. There were people from China with their gods. There were people from Greece with their gods.

But the scattered saints knew everyone needed to hear and they crossed that barrier with the message of Jesus Christ. And a great number of these people from an array of different places across the known world united in submission to Jesus.

What are our circumstances?

We are coming back from isolation—and as we do, we have an opportunity to go about talking about Jesus to the people

around us. As you know, there is a cocktail of fear and anger out there.

The circumstances in our country may not seem ideal. The tide of public opinion is firmly trending against those who follow Jesus. The gospel message is on the cusp of not just being branded as offensive but as dangerous and violent. And we can show ourselves to be different by refusing to be afraid or angry. It may cost to believe our message and follow our savior.

But I think these are days of opportunity. If the hand of the Lord is with us—who can stop us? We have a great hope in Jesus Christ and there is a world of people who need to hear about how much he has done.

And I can think that we will increasingly have an opportunity that they never did in Antioch. In our world we are amongst people who are confused about gender. Now, if we say to ourselves—the transgender people are so different, so foreign, it doesn't make sense to tell them about Jesus—we are wrong.

No.

No one is beyond hope. I pray in the days to come we have baptism testimonies of dear saints who will testify to their love for Jesus because they were loved by one of you. And you went about preaching Christ.

It is incredibly impacting to me that we don't know the names of these anonymous saints who first talked to the Gentiles

about Jesus. They saw all these people—people strange and different; people foreign and odd—they saw them and told them about Jesus.

We don't know their names—but we know what they were called: Christians.

2. Make it Clear: Stick with Jesus

The miraculous goings on reached the believers in Jerusalem and they sent a man named Barnabas up to lend a hand. His mom named him Joseph, but the Christians called him Barnabas. It means Son of encouragement. We might render it Mr. Encouragement.

He was one of those people who blessed and refreshed those he came in contact with. He was quicker with a kind word than an opinion. He was consistent in his kindness and didn't project guilt. He came alongside the hurting and gave himself for the benefit of others.

So, he was the perfect one to come and visit Antioch.

Vs. 23,

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.

Do you see how he encouraged them?

“To remain faithful to the Lord with steadfast purpose.”

In other words, devote yourself to Jesus and his purposes. What he told these saints, we would be good to heed as well. We all need to be reminded to remain faithful and have a steadfast purpose. It is easy to lose focus; to get distracted; to wander away.

Remain faithful to Jesus.

We know what that means—We follow Jesus.

When we sin—confess and are ALWAYS forgiven—and we keep following Jesus.

When we face trials—we cry out to the Lord for help—and keep following Jesus.

When we are heartbroken—we pour out our hearts to God—and keep following Jesus.

When we have victories—we thank God from whom all blessings flow—and keep following Jesus.

When we fail miserably—we ask for help—and keep following Jesus.

When we come together—we remind ourselves Jesus is worth it—and we keep following Jesus.

When we

Following Jesus is our grand purpose. He is your purpose. He is my purpose. Notice the effect this teaching had—

And a great many people were added to the Lord.

When the church stays close to Jesus, the gospel message will be on their lips. And when the gospel message is on their lips, others will be added.

We need not—we must not—put discipleship and evangelism at odds. They go hand in hand.

Barnabas realizes that these converts who had gelled into a church needed more than he could give. He goes off and finds an academic genius named Saul who was in Tarsus. He walked the 150 miles to go off and get Saul. Barnabas searched the city, found Saul and brought him back to Antioch.

²⁵ 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.

This is the same Saul that had participated in the murder of Stephen.

“Then they cast him out of the city and stoned him. And the witnesses laid down their garments at the feet of a young man named Saul. ⁵⁹ And as they were stoning Stephen, he called out, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.” ⁶⁰ And falling to his knees he cried

out with a loud voice, “Lord, do not hold this sin against them.” And when he had said this, he fell asleep.

And Saul approved of his execution.” Acts 7:58-8:1

This same Saul who was glad to see Stephen executed, this same Saul who was there when all the persecution started that spread Christians all across the known globe, this Saul was the one that helped some of the people he chased off from Jerusalem.

What? When does that happen?

The Lord revels in using unlikely means to bring sinner to himself. Do you see that? This whole account should give us confidence as we go out into the world armed the message about Jesus Christ. It is about the things God uses—

“For consider your calling, brothers: not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. [27] But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; [28] God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, [29] so that no human being might boast in the presence of God. [30] And because of him you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, righteousness and sanctification and redemption, [31] so that,

as it is written, “Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord.” 1
Corinthians 1:26–31

Do you see?

Our temptation is to feel like we need to be uber-prepared
have all the answers and be impressive as we speak about Jesus
to those in the world that don't know him.

Folks, this is who we are:

Not overly impressive
Not overly educated
Not overly wealthy
Not overly strategic
Not overly connected

Just like these anonymous saints in Antioch. What did the
pagans call these scattered Christians?

The Wise ones?
The Bible Answer people?
The Great Debaters?
The Wealthy ones?
The Impressive ones?

No.

And in Antioch the disciples were first called Christians.

Oh man, that gives me goose bumps I long for people to forget my name but just remember—yeah he is that guy with Jesus. There would be no greater honor. Because there is no one like Jesus. Why would he take an interest in me?

I don't know. But I'm grateful.

The stuck with Jesus—we must too.

And that fact alone may allow us to stand out. The answer we have for society is not political or social reform, but Jesus. Those anonymous Christians stood out in a city torn by strife.

Antioch was crowded—on average 200 people living in an acre of space. The highest density in the states is Manhattan island and that is 100 people per acre. Antioch was that crowded without high rises. Our property is about 5 acres, imagine 1000 people living on this property. That is a ton of people.

Further, I told you earlier that there were at least 18 different and distinct ethnic quarters in the city—what I didn't tell you was that each quarter was separated from each other. They were kept apart by walls. Antioch was a city torn by racial strife.

Race riots were a regular occurrence.

And then come these people who didn't fit the mold. Rodney Stark describes their effect,

“It (Christianity) provided new norms and new kinds of social relationships able to cope with the urgent urban problems. To cities filled with homeless and impoverished, Christians offered charity as well as hope. To cities filled with orphans and widows, Christians offered a new and expanded sense of family. To cities torn by violent ethnic strife, Christianity offered a new basis for social solidarity. To cities faced with epidemics, fires, earthquakes, Christianity offered effective medical services.” Rodney Stark

And the people of Antioch saw all this, and they realized these people were a new kind of people. They treated everyone as family, loved indiscriminately, sacrificed habitually, and constantly had the name of Christ on their lips. Because they loved Jesus and were loved by Jesus they could freely love anyone else.

And Antioch took notice. And they asked—who are you guys?

We know about—

Herodians

Grecians

Persians

Indians

Romans

Jews

Ethiopians

Cypriots

Syrian

But you don't fit any of those molds. So Antioch gave them a new designation.

And in Antioch the disciples were first called Christians.

These people are those Christ people. Christians.
How are you known? How do you want people to describe you?

Mom

Dad

Engineer

Husband

Teacher

Wife

Student

Single

Real Estate Agent

Grandad

Mechanic

Grandmom

Architect

Son

Daughter

We may be call of those things—but those things are not who we are.

Those are wonderful labels but if you follow Jesus none of those things are who you are primarily. None of those things are the core of what you are.

You and I are of Christ.

As we go about this dangerous business of going out our doors, we must remember that we go out to a world that is confused and lost.

This world does not need:

Our advice

Our opinions

Our politics

Our rage

Our judgement

But our Jesus.

PRAY