

**Sixth Sunday of Easter – May 10, 2015**  
**Good Shepherd Ev. Lutheran Church**

*Pastor Charles Heup*

**Acts 11:19-30 NIV**

Now those who had been scattered by the persecution that broke out when Stephen was killed traveled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus and Antioch, spreading the word only among Jews. 20) Some of them, however, men from Cyprus and Cyrene, went to Antioch and began to speak to Greeks also, telling them the good news about the Lord Jesus. 21) **The Lord's hand was with them, and a great number of people believed and turned to the Lord.** 22) **News of this reached the church in Jerusalem, and they sent Barnabas to Antioch.** 23) When he arrived and saw what the grace of God had done, he was glad and encouraged them all to remain true to the Lord with all their hearts. 24) He was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and faith, and a great number of people were brought to the Lord. 25) Then Barnabas went to Tarsus to look for Saul, 26) and when he found him, he brought him to Antioch. So for a whole year Barnabas and Saul met with the church and taught great numbers of people. The disciples were called Christians first at Antioch. 27) During this time some prophets came down from Jerusalem to Antioch. 28) One of them, named Agabus, stood up and through the Spirit predicted that a severe famine would spread over the entire Roman world. (This happened during the reign of Claudius.) 29) **The disciples, as each one was able, decided to provide help for the brothers and sisters living in Judea.** 30) **This they did, sending their gift to the elders by Barnabas and Saul.**

In the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, my dear fellow Christians;

Following our Lord's resurrection from the dead, Jesus commanded his disciples to bear witness to his name in Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth. The book of Acts is an account of how the believers carried out that command. Over the last several weeks our First Scripture lesson reported that the disciples had busied themselves with speaking of Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection – although the Lord had given them power to do miracles in his name, the enemies of the Lord's church were not persuaded to abandon their hostility to Christ. But the Lord blessed his church and spread of the Gospel, non-the-less. Amazingly enough, the persecution which was intended to impede the spread of the Gospel actually contributed to the spreading of the Gospel. Even after the apostles were arrested and ordered not to speak of Jesus the apostles were not silenced. Luke tells us in (Acts 5:42 NIV) **Day after day, in the temple courts and from house to house, they never stopped teaching and proclaiming the good news that Jesus is the Messiah.**

Truly the hand of the Lord was with them – soon the number of believers was so large that it became necessary to appoint several individuals to assist the apostles with their work. One of those individuals was Stephen who became the first Christian martyr. (Acts 8:1 NIV) **And Saul approved of their killing him. On that day a great persecution broke out against the church in Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria.**

Both the persecution and the spread of the Gospel continued as the opening verses of our text inform us. **Now those who had been scattered by the persecution that broke out when Stephen was killed traveled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus and Antioch, spreading the word only among Jews. 20) Some of them, however, men from Cyprus and Cyrene, went to Antioch and began to speak to Greeks also, telling them the good news about the Lord Jesus. 21) The Lord's hand was with them...**

The inspired accounts from Acts are powerful reminders to us that

*Theme:* The Lord's Hand is With His Church

1. He blesses it with growth
2. He blesses it with workers
3. He blesses it with generosity

These reminders are a breath of fresh air and an encouragement to us today because still today the Lord's church is confronted with challenges and obstacles which threaten to impede the spread of the Gospel.

Turning to our text we can see how the Lord uses times of difficulty in the church for his own purposes – blessing the church with growth.

This map will help us to understand the way the Lord caused his Gospel to spread.

The Christian fugitives from Jerusalem fled to the north and stopped on the Island of Cyprus just off the coast of Syria where they began sharing the word among the Jewish people who settled there. Some of those converts from Cyprus and Cyrene took the Gospel message to Antioch where they began to share it with Greeks – this is one of the earliest reports of Christians doing foreign mission work!

The Gospel message among the Greeks in Antioch enjoyed remarkable success because the Lord's hand was with those who were sharing the Gospel. **A great number of people believed and turned to the Lord,** Luke tells us. These Greeks were true converts to Christianity. Even before the time of Jesus there were Greeks who had embraced the Jewish faith – many of these people, known as proselytes, had come to faith in Jesus following Peter's Pentecost sermon. The Greeks in Antioch were pagans before they came to faith in Christ. This is another step forward in the spread of Christianity. The Gospel was breaking down cultural barriers as it began its spread to the ends of the earth. The hand of the Lord was blessing the work of his church enabling it to overcome persecution and cultural barriers.

But with growth – there came a need – the need for workers. The disciples reached that point in Jerusalem and the hand of the Lord provided spirit filled men like Stephen to assist in the ministry of that group of believers. Once again, Luke reminds us that the Lord will provide workers for his church.

**21) The Lord's hand was with them, and a great number of people believed and turned to the Lord. 22) News of this reached the church in Jerusalem, and they sent Barnabas to Antioch.**

The Lord blessed his church with workers. Again, the Lord's Hand was with those he sent to proclaim the message of forgiveness and eternal life through faith in the crucified and risen Savior. **23) When he arrived and saw what the grace of God had done, he was glad and encouraged them all to remain true to the Lord with all their hearts. 24) He was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and faith, and a great number of people were brought to the Lord.**

Barnabas, himself was originally from the Island of Cyprus – the Christians in Jerusalem regarded themselves as the mother church and were more than eager to provide assistance to this daughter congregation in Antioch.

Once again the blessing of growth caused a need and an opportunity for additional manpower to serve this booming mission field. Prior to the events of this text, the Lord Jesus had stopped a man named Saul from Tarsus in his tracks as he was headed to Damascus to persecute and arrest Christians. The Lord Jesus called Saul to faith. The Lord had plans for Saul -- (Acts 9:15 NIV) **But the Lord said ... This man is my chosen instrument to proclaim my name to the Gentiles and their kings and to the people of Israel.**

When Saul, whom we know as the Apostle Paul, came back to Jerusalem following his conversion it was Barnabas who had welcomed him and helped to remove the suspicions and misgivings the Christians in Jerusalem had about him. Barnabas now headed to Tarsus to recruit Paul to work with him in Antioch. **Then Barnabas went to Tarsus to look for Saul, 26) and when he found him, he brought him to Antioch. So for**

**a whole year Barnabas and Saul met with the church and taught great numbers of people. The disciples were called Christians first at Antioch.**

Once again the Lord's hand provided both workers and growth for his church. But now this church which had spread and grown even in the face of persecution would be threatened from another angle.

**27) During this time some prophets came down from Jerusalem to Antioch. 28) One of them, named Agabus, stood up and through the Spirit predicted that a severe famine would spread over the entire Roman world. (This happened during the reign of Claudius.)**

In the early history of the Christian church – before the completion of the NT, God provided prophets for his church. These individuals were given messages from God concerning events which were to come – similar to the messages God had given to the prophets in OT times.

The prophet Agabus announced that there would be severe famine throughout the Roman empire which would affect the Christians in Jerusalem. Upon learning of this need the Christians in Antioch put their faith into action. **29) The disciples, as each one was able, decided to provide help for the brothers and sisters living in Judea. 30) This they did, sending their gift to the elders by Barnabas and Saul.**

The hand of the Lord blessed the early Christian church with a generous response to the needs of their brothers and sisters in Jerusalem who would be in need because of the famine. The offering the Christians in Antioch gathered was given willingly and freely – each gave according to their own ability in loving response to the Gospel.

As I mentioned earlier this account of the Lord's blessings on the early Christian church serves as a reminder to us that we can count on the Lord's hand to supply and bless his Church today. As we look at our own congregation and the challenges before us we need the encouragement our text offers to help us to focus on our mission with confidence that the Lord's hand will bless us.

As we focus on the mission the Lord has given to us to proclaim the Gospel in our families and neighborhoods the Lord will provide growth to his church – let's never forget that it's not about our congregation – but it's about winning souls for the Lord. As we turn to the Lord in prayer with the request that he will provide workers to enable this Christian congregation to be built up in the faith and to carry out the ministry the Lord had provided for us to do we can be confident that the Lord will open his hand and supply the workers that are needed – workers who will use their God-given talents, abilities and faith in service to the Lord. And as we consider the challenging financial times which we are facing in our county we are reminded that the Lord will provide for our needs as individuals, as a congregation and as a church body.

With those thoughts in mind let us open our hymnals to hymn 536 and join together in praising the Lord Jesus Christ, the Church's head, whose hand is With His Church blessing it with growth, workers and generosity. Amen.

Lord Jesus Christ, the Church's head,  
You are her one foundation.  
In you she trusts, before you bows,  
And waits for your salvation.  
Built on this rock secure, Your Church shall endure  
Though all the world decay And all things pass away.  
Oh, hear, oh, hear us, Jesus!

O Lord, let this your little flock,  
Your name alone confessing,  
Continue in your loving care,  
True unity possessing.  
Your sacraments, O Lord, And your saving Word  
To us e'er pure retain. Grant that they may remain  
Our only strength and comfort.

Help us to serve you evermore  
With hearts both pure and lowly.  
And may your Word, that light divine,  
Shine on in splendor holy  
That we repentance show, In faith ever grow.  
The pow'r of sin destroy And evils that annoy.  
Oh, make us faithful Christians.

And for your gospel let us dare  
To sacrifice all treasure;  
Teach us to bear your blessed cross,  
To find in you all pleasure.  
Oh, grant us steadfastness In joy and distress.  
Lord, for your mercy's sake, Let us by grace partake  
Of endless joy and glory.

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