

The Triumph of God's Grace

Acts 11:19-30

***Main Idea:** God is not threatened by persecution or enemies, but uses them in pouring out His grace, advancing His Kingdom, and building His Church!*

INTRODUCTION

This morning, we are going to be looking at Acts 11:19-30. You are welcome to turn there in your Bibles. If you are using one of the Bibles there in the pew, you will find Acts 11 on page 865. Also, if you need a Bible, please feel free to take one of the pew Bibles home with you.

Illustration: Incomparable God – Isaiah 40

One of my favorite chapters in the Bible is Isaiah 40. Written to Israel (God's people) as they were facing the massive trial of captivity, the Holy Spirit, through Isaiah, gives a reminder of the greatness of God with some vivid imagery. Here are just a couple examples. Verses 14 and 15 say...

¹⁴ Has the Lord ever needed anyone's advice?
Does he need instruction about what is good?
Did someone teach him what is right
or show him the path of justice?

¹⁵ No, for all the nations of the world
are but a drop in the bucket.
They are nothing more
than dust on the scales...

Have you ever measured the rise of water when you put a drop in a bucket? Have you ever poured out a WHOLE drop of water? No, it is insignificant; inconsequential; essentially nothing.

Or have you ever dusted your scales to make sure you are getting an accurate reading? Oh, that's why our scales are reading higher than I was hoping - I've forgotten to dust them! I was starting to think someone was messing with me and slowly (or not so slowly) changing the settings on our scales, but it turns out they just need to be cleaned! No, dust is nothing! It doesn't register on the scales. What a good reminder of the greatness of our God! In comparison to Him, all the nations of the world are NOTHING!

In reading through Isaiah 40, you see a reoccurring and rhetorical question from God. It goes like this...

²⁵ "To whom will you compare me?
Who is my equal?" asks the Holy One.

The resounding answer is: **No one, and nothing!**

As we continue our study in Acts today, we are looking at a passage in chapter 11 that reminds us of the greatness of God, the fact that He has no real competition, and that His Grace is being poured out, His Kingdom is being advanced, and His Church is being built, even in the midst of the most difficult situations and strongest opposition.

Prayer...

- You are great! No one compares to you, you have no rivals, you have no equals, and we are grateful!

- Thank you for pouring out your grace on us! Please do it again as we encounter you through your word this morning. Open our eyes and help us see you and respond in worship!

THE WORD

Let's begin by reading the passage...

Acts 11:19-30 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. 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. 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.

Context

This passage is a historical account of a profound moment in the early days of the Church. It captures the explosive spread of the gospel to Antioch (and in Antioch), prompted by some surprising circumstances. Luke begins his account of this amazing event in verse 19, by providing some valuable context. He begins by saying...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.

The events of this passage are immediately tied back to the persecution that began with the martyrdom of Stephen in Acts 7 and 8. You may remember that Stephen was “a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit” (Acts 6:5), was “full of grace and power” (Acts 6:8), was one of the seven men chosen to serve the Jerusalem church in a deacon capacity (Acts 6:5), and “was doing great wonders and signs among the people” (Acts 6:8). Stephen was a powerful instrument God was using in the Body of Christ and in the spread of the Gospel in the Jerusalem community! However, the religious leaders and rulers were stirred up against him, seized him, “set up false witnesses” (Acts 6:13) against him, and then, stoned him to death - enraged by his bold proclamation of the Gospel.

Acts 8:1 continues the story by saying, “And Saul approved of his (Stephen's) execution. And there arose on that day a great persecution against the church in Jerusalem, and they were scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria...” This was a dark moment for the early church. Not only did they lose an “all-star” that day, they also became the target of a great persecution. Homes were invaded, men and women were being hauled to prison, and the church was being ravaged. Many decided to flee, leaving their homes, communities, and thriving church, as they scattered to surrounding regions.

It must have seemed like a giant win for the opposition; a massive setback to the mission of making disciples and spreading the gospel; a knockout blow to the early Church. And yet, it turns out, God was not caught off guard by this turn of events. He wasn't threatened or slowed down by the attack. In fact, He took what was intended for evil; what was intended to destroy and extinguish His Church; and used it to accomplish the exact opposite!

Geographic Expansion of the Church

Instead of destroying the church, shortly after its birth, this persecution triggered an explosive expansion. It scattered those early disciples who had heard the Gospel, put their faith in Jesus, and received the Holy Spirit, to the surrounding areas where they could spread the word and multiply! The persecution actually contributed to the fulfillment of Jesus' prophetic statement in Acts 1:8, "... you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth."

Several weeks ago, when Pastor Stan preached on Stephen's martyrdom, the ensuing persecution, and the scattering of the Church, in chapters 7 and 8, he said this... "These scattered Christians were not refugees; they were missionaries. Stephen's death and the persecution that followed were not random events that merely demonstrated the cost of discipleship. They were events that catapulted the church out of Jerusalem so that the church could be established in new places. In other words, this was Jesus' method of church growth. He uses what appears to be His enemies' victories to expand His territory and His kingdom."

Who else can do that? Who else can so thoroughly flip their enemies' apparent victories on their head and use them for their own purposes?!

Ethnic Expansion of the Church

After noting the incredible geographical expansion of the church, resulting from the persecution, Luke also records the ethnic expansion of the church. At the end of verse 19 we see that those who were scattered were "speaking the word to no one except Jews". However, verse 20 continues... 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.

While in general, those who were scattered initially shared the gospel along ethnic lines (with fellow Jews), there were some, who on arriving in Antioch, preached the Good News of Jesus with the Hellenist also. In other places, like Acts 6, "Hellenists" is a reference to Greek speaking Jews. However, in this context it is set in contrast to Jews and is almost certainly a reference to Greek speaking Gentiles.

This account of the ethnic expansion of the church in Antioch continues the theme we have seen earlier in Acts, as the gospel spread to the Samaritans in chapter 8 and to the Gentiles in chapter 10. You will remember that God clearly communicated the ethnic expansion of His Kingdom through Peter's vision and the salvation of Cornelius and his household.

Just as God was clearly opening the door to the Gentiles in Acts 10, it is clearly God at work in the spread of the gospel to the Gentiles here in Antioch. Verse 21 says... And the hand of the Lord was with them, and a great number who believed turned to the Lord. This group of people who began sharing the Good News beyond the Jews weren't rebelling or deviating from the plan. The hand of the Lord was with them! This was a Spirit-filled, Spirit-directed initiative - opening the doors of the church (of God's family) to all who would believe in Jesus and receive the forgiveness of sins!

God Building the Church in Antioch

And, since it was something God was doing... “a great number who believed turned to the Lord.” Don’t forget, this had all started with Stephen’s martyrdom and a great persecution of the church in Jerusalem. The believers were scattered all over. And now, the gospel is spreading in Antioch to both Jews and Gentiles and the Lord is causing a great harvest!

In fact, so many people were believing in Jesus and turning to the Lord, we see in verse 22...
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.

Upon hearing about what was happening in Antioch, the church in Jerusalem sent Barnabas. We aren’t told explicitly what Barnabas’ assignment was. However, we see Barnabas playing a role of support and encouragement, which is consistent with the meaning of his name, “son of encouragement”, which we are given when we are introduced to him in chapter 4. It is interesting that Luke notes that Barnabas “was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and of faith”.

We see a previous demonstration of the kind of man Barnabas was back in chapter 9. It is just after Saul’s conversion and all the disciples in Jerusalem are still afraid of Saul. Remember, prior to his conversion, Saul had been going from house to house ravaging the church – He was at the tip of the spearhead of the great persecution. Not surprisingly, the followers of Christ weren’t immediately convinced that Saul’s conversion was legitimate and that he wasn’t just looking to infiltrate and further destroy them. It was in this moment that Barnabas, son of encouragement, a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and of faith, came alongside Saul, brought him before the apostles, and facilitated Saul’s entry into fellowship in the church in Jerusalem.

So, it is not surprising that the church (ultimately the Holy Spirit) sent Barnabas to support and encourage this incredible spread of the gospel and development of the church in Antioch. And when Barnabas arrived he “saw the grace of God... and was glad”! Something incredible was happening in Antioch as Jesus was being preached, many were responding (both Jew and Gentile), and God was birthing a local church that would become a hub for supporting the continued spread of the gospel. Barnabas saw the grace of God being poured out in Antioch and was glad!

But I bet Barnabas saw the grace of God in the bigger picture too. Put yourselves in Barnabas’ shoes. Remember, Barnabas was there when this all started. He was part of the infant church in Jerusalem, he would have been around when Stephen was executed, he had witnessed and experienced the great persecution, and he must have grieved the massive evacuation of dear brothers and sisters in Christ who were fleeing Jerusalem. He, like everyone else, likely wondered where God was and where his grace and favor had gone. And now, as he witnesses what God is doing in Antioch, I am guessing the fog is beginning to clear and things are beginning to make sense. God’s grace is not just being poured out generously AGAIN... It was being poured out the whole time! God’s grace, though not obvious at the time, was there in the moments of martyrdom and extreme persecution!

Main Idea: *God is not threatened by persecution or enemies, but uses them in pouring out His grace, advancing His Kingdom, and building His Church!*

After Barnabas encourages these new believers to remain faithful to the Lord we see again that, “... a great many people were added to the Lord.” God is able to work powerfully through people who are full of the Spirit and faith! If someone is full of the Spirit, they are not full of themselves; full of their own goals; full of their own wisdom; controlled by their own desires. Instead, they are

filled with the Spirit, His fruit, His mind, and are conduits through whom His supernatural power may flow. And being full of faith causes one to trust, depend on, and follow Him. So, it is not surprising that God worked powerfully through Barnabas and further grew the Church in Antioch through his ministry.

Saul

Luke continues... 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. As Barnabas witnesses the grace of God in Antioch and sees the continued rapid expansion of the church, he decides help is needed, and goes and gets Saul to assist in teaching and shepherding this young congregation.

Isn't this stunning?! First, Luke begins this passage by making sure the connection is clear between the persecution in Jerusalem and the birth of the church in Antioch. And now, he adds that Saul, the one who had approved of Stephen's execution; the one who had gone from house to house ravaging the church, is being summoned to assist in teaching and equipping these new disciples! This is another display of God's Power and Grace!

When Saul met Jesus on the Road to Damascus, he was radically transformed. God poured out His grace on an enemy (the one who was ravaging His church), and through Jesus Saul was adopted into God's family. Now, this transformed, previous enemy of the church, is being used by God in shepherding this infant, but rapidly growing, church in Antioch.

Antioch

We see another indicator of the rapid growth of the church in Antioch with the note about this being the first place the disciples were called Christians. This movement wasn't going unnoticed. It was rapidly growing, word was getting around, and it was taking on a clear identity of its own. The church had not given themselves this title. It was given to them by the surrounding community, as they witnessed this quickly developing group of people who had been transformed by Jesus and were following Him as their Lord.

In the closing verses of this section, we see immediate evidence of health and maturity in this new church. Jesus is on display in them and is being expressed through them as they join in bearing the burdens of their brothers and sisters who are in need. Verses 27-30 say...

Outreach

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. ¹

This is another display of God's grace! The gospel has spread to Antioch, many lives have been transformed and a church established, and now His grace that has been poured into them spills back on their brothers and sisters in Judea who are struggling because of a famine. Because of our great God, this story that started with persecution turns into a powerful display of wave after wave of grace! It is a story of the Triumph of God's Grace!

¹ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Ac 11:19–30.

Main Idea: *God is not threatened by persecution or enemies, but uses them in pouring out His grace, advancing His Kingdom, and building His Church!*

APPLICATION

As we move to the application of this passage, let me suggest three points for your consideration.

1. The door to salvation in Jesus is open to everyone!

First, the door to salvation in Jesus is open to everyone! We saw in this passage a reminder that the good news about Jesus crosses geographic and ethnic boundaries. We also saw it extended to and received by Saul, one of the Church's greatest opponents at that time. God's grace was poured out on Saul, He turned to Jesus, was made a new creature in Christ, and became one of the most impactful shepherds of the Church for all time. The door to forgiveness of sins and eternal life in Jesus is open to everyone! If you haven't received the free gift of forgiveness of sins, transformation, and eternal life through Jesus, please know that the invitation is extended to you!

And church, let's not forget when we observe or encounter those who are opposed to the Gospel, we were all once enemies of God. And the same gift of salvation through Jesus that we have received is extended to them! We have the opportunity to pray for them and express Jesus to them... That Christ may be seen by all!

2. We do not need to fear persecution.

Second, we do not need to fear persecution or opponents of the Church. Our God is not threatened by persecution or enemies, but uses them in pouring out His grace, advancing His Kingdom, and building His Church!

I believe this is extremely applicable! As values in our culture shift, as Christianity becomes less popular, and as opposition to Kingdom values increases, it is easy to become fearful, reactive, and negative. It is easy to think that God's work is being hindered, the Kingdom is no longer advancing, and the Church is at risk of dying. But we don't need to be afraid, we don't need to be glum. The One who is building His church is like no other! Nothing compares to His strength, wisdom, and grace.

Remember, Isaiah 40 tells us that all the nations of the world are like dust on a scale or a drop in a bucket in comparison to the greatness of our God! And He is in the business of taking what His enemies intended for evil and using it for good! We actually have more reason to be concerned about the effects of comfort and prosperity on the Church than those of persecution. Jesus said "...it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God." (Matthew 19:24).

The fact is, when we are comfortable, safe, and prospering, it is easy to become disillusioned and think we are self-sufficient, in control, and only minorly in need of God. It is easy to become complacent and lose sight of our absolute dependence on Him. I realize comfort and safety and prosperity are much more appealing to us than persecution. I am right there with you, and I have no plans to voluntarily trade in my comfort and safety for persecution.

But what I believe our Heavenly Father would want us to receive this morning, is the reminder that if we face persecution, we don't have to be afraid. Though it will be uncomfortable and very possibly horrible, it will not thwart His good purposes. In fact, it will likely speed up things like... Jesus being formed in us, the gospel being spread, and Christ being seen by all!

3. We do not need to fear suffering.

Let's expand this point of application a bit more and consider a related third point of application... We do not need to fear suffering. Whether you are ever persecuted or not, the reality is we will all suffer. That is a human reality due to sin and living in a fallen world. While salvation in Christ DOES include the promise of eternity with Him on a New Earth, free from sin and suffering... It DOES NOT include a promise of protection or deliverance from suffering now.

God does not tell believers that they will be immune to suffering while still living on a fallen earth. However, He does tell us...

- To expect trials and suffering, while remembering that He has overcome! (John 16:33) "...In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world."
- That He will work all things together for good for those who belong to Him. (Romans 8:28)
²⁸ And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to His purpose.
- To consider trials an opportunity for great joy, because they form Christ in us. (James 1:2-3)
² Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, ³ for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. ⁴ And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.

None of us are excited about persecution or trials, and we don't like watching anyone else go through them either. But we do have a God, who is beyond comparison, and is able to use these circumstances for our good and His purposes!

Conclusion

As I conclude this morning, I want to read a brief statement from Paul, the one previously known as Saul. This is the same person that initially led the persecution in Jerusalem, met Jesus on the road to Damascus, was transformed, and was used powerfully by God in shepherding the church in Antioch (and far beyond). Now he is sitting in a prison. No longer the persecutor but instead persecuted for preaching the Gospel of Christ. And this is what he says in his letter to the Philippians. Chapter 1:12-14...

¹² I want you to know, brothers, that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel, ¹³ so that it has become known throughout the whole imperial guard and to all the rest that my imprisonment is for Christ. ¹⁴ And most of the brothers, having become confident in the Lord by my imprisonment, are much more bold to speak the word without fear.

Paul understood that...

***Main Idea:** God is not threatened by persecution or enemies, but uses them in pouring out His grace, advancing His Kingdom, and building His Church!*

Benediction

1 Peter 5:10-11

¹⁰ And after you have suffered a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, confirm, strengthen, and establish you. ¹¹ To him be the dominion forever and ever. Amen.

The Triumph of God's Grace **Acts 11:19-30**

Main Idea: God is not threatened by persecution or enemies, but uses them in pouring out His grace, advancing His Kingdom, and building His Church!

Introduction

Context (19)

Geographic Expansion of the Church (19)

Ethnic Expansion of the Church (20)

This Was Something God Was Doing (21)

Barnabas (22-24)

Saul (25-26)

Church in Antioch (26-30)

Application

1.

2.

3.

Application Questions

1. How does this passage change the way you think about...
 - a. God?

 - b. persecution and suffering?

 - c. those in opposition to the Gospel and the Church?
2. What are some ways God uses persecution or suffering for good?
3. How does someone become “full of the Holy Spirit and of faith” like Barnabas?
4. How does this passage impact your life this week? Is there something the Holy Spirit is stirring in you?