



Explosive Impact • Thriving in Difficult Circumstances • Acts 11:19-30 • 10/14/2018

Main Point

The church can thrive even in difficult circumstances.

Introduction

As your group time begins, use this section to introduce the topic of discussion.

Describe one of the most difficult tasks you have tried to accomplish in life. What were the hurdles you faced, and how did you handle the difficulties?

As you have looked back on that experience, what did it teach you about perseverance and the challenges life brings your way?

By now we have all experienced our fair share of difficulties in life; some we thrive through, while others may be harder to overcome. One of the important things we learn from the New Testament is that the people of God are not immune to challenges, both internal and external. However, the early church's example reminds us that the church can—and does—thrive even in difficult circumstances.

Understanding

Unpack the biblical text to discover what the Scripture says or means about a particular topic.

Stephen's courageous defense of the gospel's universal scope had led to his martyrdom and intense persecution of the church (see 7:57-8:3). Acts 11:19 and following focuses on the activities of believers who were scattered as a result of the persecution.

| Have a volunteer read Acts 11:19-26.

Stephen's courageous defense of the gospel's universal scope had led to his martyrdom and intense persecution of the church (see 7:57–8:3). What happened as a result of persecution after Stephen's death?

Identify the two groups who were scattered and with whom they shared the gospel. Why is this significant?

**Read verse 21 again. How do you interpret the statement, “The Lord’s hand was with them”?
Read also Exodus 9:3, Luke 1:66, and Acts 4:30.**

From this point on, the Book of Acts focuses on the mission of the church at Antioch to the Gentiles. The church at Antioch is arguably one of the most influential churches, and we do not know their names. What we do know is that men from Cyprus and Cyrene interacted with the Hellenist (or Greek-speaking Gentiles) they met. The ordinary actions of these men led to the extraordinary spread of the gospel to the known world. They were so effective because “the Lord’s hand was with them.” In the Bible, “the Lord’s hand” expresses God’s power.

One of the keys from these verses is that even amid persecution, God’s people still spread the gospel. What does verse 21 tell us God does when we go?

From verse 21, we see that when God’s people go, large numbers will turn and follow Jesus. What does this truth remind us about our purpose in life? How does it impact the way you view difficulties and challenges?

News of the Gentile conversion reached the mother church in Jerusalem. They sent Barnabas to verify the work of the Holy Spirit in Antioch. The Great Commission is a command to make disciples, not merely converts. Barnabas went to Antioch to ensure that this was what was happening. The strength of Barnabas’s character gave the church in Jerusalem confidence in him to evaluate this new work of the Lord in Antioch.

What do verses 22-24 teach us about how God works in and through us, regardless of our circumstances?

What do we learn about gospel ministry from these examples?

The Antioch church earned the title of Christians. As they grew and matured in faith, they lived in obedience to Jesus’ Acts 1:8 mandate to be His witnesses unto all the world.

| Have a volunteer read Acts 11:27-30.

What need presented itself to the church at Antioch and how did the church respond?

How did sending financial aid to the church in Jerusalem show that the Christians at Antioch were maturing spiritually? What is the connection between discipleship and giving?

An important way the church thrives is by loving and supporting one another through difficulties. What needs to change for you to be more aware of the needs of those around you?

The reality of a coming famine in Judea gave the Christians in Antioch the opportunity to put their faith into action. The young believers responded by giving generously to the cause of Christ in the region. Often when stressful events happen, we have the tendency to look inward, but the church in Antioch looked outward and responded boldly to the needs around them. As Jesus' disciples, we can encourage others by showing we care about them and by helping them in their difficulties. Making ourselves and our resources available to them will cost us, but Christ's love motivates us to care about all people, "especially for those who belong to the household of faith" (Gal. 6:10).

Application

Help your group identify how the truths from the Scripture passage apply directly to their lives.

How are you encouraged and/or challenged by the early church's example in today's passage?

What is God saying to you? How is God calling you to grow?

What step of obedience do you need to take this week?

Pray

Thank God for the bold witness of the early believers in Antioch. Pray that He would make us a people who are passionate for His name to be known by those around us. Ask that He would give us courage and strength to thrive through difficult circumstances that will come our way.

Commentary

| Acts 11:19-30

11:19. This verse links back to Acts 8:4: Those who had been scattered preached the word wherever they went. Luke picks up precisely on that wording and continues the story of the dispersion of Hellenistic Jewish Christians after the death of Stephen. We know what happened to Philip; now Luke wants to tell us how God is about to do a new work in a most unlikely place. Most of these escaping Hellenists were not as radical as some would have thought. They carefully preached the message only to Jews in three places Luke names—Phoenicia, Cyprus, and Antioch. The Phoenician plain extended seventy-five miles along the coast of middle Syria from Mt. Carmel to the Eleutheros River. Presumably, the scattered witnesses visited cities like Ptolemais, Tyre, Sidon, and even Zarepahth (cf. Acts 21:3-7). Others took to the sea, escaping to the island of Cyprus in the eastern Mediterranean, approximately one hundred miles off the Syrian coast. All these cities (including Antioch) were steeped in Hellenistic culture, logical places for the refugees to land. They would have had no trouble explaining their faith in Christ to Hellenists like themselves. As in the early ministry of Paul, these scattered Christians first went to synagogues and preached to Jews.

11:20. Antioch was different. The word Greeks seems synonymous with Gentiles in this context, and Luke fully intends us to see the link with what has been building throughout the last three chapters. Presumably, the men from Cyprus and Cyrene were Hellenists who had been in Jerusalem at the time of Stephen's martyrdom. Instead of returning home, they headed north to Antioch. So Antioch developed contact with both these places (Barnabas came to Antioch from Cyprus, and one of the first missionary candidates was Lucius of Cyrene, 13:1).

This aggressive evangelism by anonymous preachers throws our heavily-programmed modern church into stark and feeble contrast. Never mind that they had been driven from their homes and scattered. Never mind that God led them to one of the most wicked cities of the Roman world. They had a message to deliver—the good news about the Lord Jesus. Notice they didn't preach a coming Messiah; that appropriately related to Jewish groups. Even though the Greeks in Antioch may have been proselytes, they possessed only a small portion of the zeal Jerusalemite Jews held for the coming of the Messiah.

11:21. God blessed these sincere Christians who were willing to share the gospel so that in Antioch a great number of people believed and turned to the Lord. The church erupted at Antioch, and a new thing happened. Both the Ethiopian eunuch and Cornelius reached out to Christians, inviting the gospel. Here Jewish Christians aggressively take the gospel to Gentiles. The church has begun to turn the world upside down. The second congregation of the New Testament comes together as the Gentile effort expands. Bock writes, "Antioch is a model community, engaging in evangelism, teaching, and ministry to brothers in need. There is no racial prejudice in the community. Only the testimony of divine reconciliation" (Bock, 76).

11:22-23. One wonders why a significant new effort like this in a Syrian city would not have called for one of the apostles. Throughout Acts, the Twelve seem quite content to serve the rapidly growing church in Jerusalem and its environs; they also might have been less than comfortable in the pagan surroundings of Antioch. But not Barnabas. He bridged the Greek and Hebrew elements in the church. Having come from Cyprus, he was not a typical "Jerusalemite" Jew. He had already established a solid reputation for piety, generosity, and encouragement in the Jerusalem church and, after all, what do new converts need more than encouragement?

11:24. Luke describes Barnabas much in the way he did Stephen and tells us that not only did he encourage new believers, but many more came to Christ after Barnabas arrived. Leadership is the name of the game in any church, but not the monarchical leadership of the Old Covenant. In the New Covenant, groups of believers serve one another. A layman, with no apparent qualification other than faithful service in another congregation, now appears to become the first senior pastor at Antioch.

11:25-26. Every expanding church considers adding additional staff, and Antioch did, too. Pastor Barnabas needed an associate pastor of Christian education, someone who could help in the teaching ministry of new converts. Remember Paul had been staying pretty close to home at Tarsus for nearly ten years. Yet Luke suggests Barnabas had to search a bit to find the brilliant rabbi.

Some commentators speculate that Saul had already begun a ministry to Gentiles, preaching in the Cylician synagogues and perhaps stirring up trouble in his hometown (2 Cor. 11:23-27). Others suggest the vision of 2 Corinthians 12:1-4 fits into these years as well. Whatever difficulties Saul may have had in Tarsus seem to have dissipated in the friendly reception at Antioch, for he and Barnabas taught great numbers of people for a year.

The end of verse 26 offers an interesting Lucan note—The disciples were first called Christians at Antioch. We use that term so commonly we think it must be scattered all across the New Testament, but it appears only three times—Acts 11:26; Acts 26:28; 1 Peter 4:16. Normally in Acts, Luke refers to Christians as “believers,” “disciples,” or “brothers.” Christians was an outside nickname, possibly given in derision. It means “Christ followers” or “people of Christ’s party.” A new religious group had entered the New Testament scene. Up to this point we have essentially seen Jews and Gentiles. Now Christians are no longer a subset of Judaism but a distinct identity in the Mediterranean world.

11:27-28. Though Antioch lay far north of Jerusalem, we commonly read the word down in situations like this because of the topography. The Jews didn’t use up and down as we do, to refer to north and south, but rather to describe low country and high country. Enter a visitor from Jerusalem, a prophet named Agabus whom we see again in 21:10-11. We have no evidence that he was sent by the Jerusalem church; prophets in this time tended to wander about a bit. Proclaiming this message of the coming famine wherever he traveled, Agabus found his way to Antioch.

Egyptian documents indicate a major famine in certain parts of the empire around a.d. 46. As to the entire Roman world, we have already noted Luke’s fascination with hyperbole. Luke drops chronological hints throughout this book, and we shall explore this one further in “Deeper Discoveries.” Here he clearly placed emphasis upon how these young believers responded to the dire news of coming hunger among their brothers and sisters to the south.

11:29-30. The process here is very important for us today. Jerusalem did not ask for help, though they certainly had heard Agabus’ message even before Antioch. Paul and Barnabas did not start a relief program with canned goods stacking up in the foyer ready for shipment to Jerusalem. The crisp and precise text provides several crucial lessons for congregational operations today:

1. The people themselves initiated the relief effort on the basis of what they learned from Agabus.
2. Apparently everyone participated.

3. Participation depended upon one's ability to give.

4. Whatever theological differences might have still existed between Jerusalem and Antioch, they posed no barrier to sharing with other Christians in a time of need.

Fascinating, too, that when Barnabas and Saul took this gift to Jerusalem, they gave it to the elders, not the apostles. This reminds us of Acts 6 where the Twelve delegated relief matters to seven Hellenistic leaders. Just as the office of deacon should probably not be read back into the text of Acts 6, the office of elder most likely does not stem from Acts 11.

This first mention of "elders" in Acts should not surprise us nor make us dash immediately to 1 Timothy 3. Elders were common in synagogue worship, so these Jewish Christians carried over something of that same organization to the church. We will find elders mentioned several times again in Acts (14:23; 15:2, 4, 6, 22-23; 16:4; 20:17; 21:18).

Reading Assignment for next week

Acts 13:1-4