

Famine and Persecution

Acts 11:27-12:11

Many of us are familiar with the Hymn, “*It is well*”, which was written by Horatio Spafford and published in 1876.

Spafford wrote this hymn after a number of tragedies had happened in his life.

The 1871 Great Chicago Fire ruined him financially, and then his business took another hit in 1873.

After the second financial hit, Spafford decided to travel to England to help the Evangelist Dwight Moody, but there was a change of plans.

Spafford had to stay behind while he took care of some business in Chicago, so he sent his wife and their four daughters ahead.

Spafford's wife and four daughters were on the ship heading for England when it sank, killing 226 people, including his four daughters, but his wife survived.

Anna sent her husband a telegram that read, “*Saved alone*”.

Later, Spafford traveled to England to meet his wife, and as the ship he was on passed the spot near where his four daughters had died, he penned the hymn, “*It is well*”.

Please open your Bibles to the ***Book of Acts 11...***

Last week, we learned how Peter went back to Jerusalem and defended the fact that some Gentile believers received Christ.

Those of the circumcision believed that Gentiles had to convert to Judaism before becoming Christians.

Peter calmly shared what the Lord had laid on his heart and how God was working through this whole circumstance because once again, Peter showed evidence of a changed heart.

Acts 11:18, When they heard these things, they became silent; and they glorified God, saying, "Then God has also granted to the Gentiles repentance to life." NKJV Then...

Some men went to Antioch and began presenting the Gospel to the Greeks living there, as the Lord blessed their evangelism.

Barnabas realized that because the LORD was moving in the lives of so many people, he was going to need some help **discipling** the new converts, so he went and got Saul/Paul.

We also heard when the term “**Christian**” was first used.

Notice that in *Acts 11:26, the disciples were first called Christians in Antioch.*

The definition of a Christian is someone who resembles Christ as they follow His teachings.

Today, we will talk about the generosity of some believers who gave to other Christians who were hurt because of a famine, and then we will hear about some persecution from the government.

I. Christian charity.

Read *Acts 11:27-30*

The text gives a timeline of when this happened, “*in these days*”, the days when Barnabas and Paul were discipling the believers in Antioch.

The Bible is reliable, and we can look at extra-biblical writings to verify this famine.

According to Bible Hub, “*Under Claudius the world was visited with a famine, which writers that are entire strangers to our religion have recorded in their histories.*”

Two of the non-Christian historians who recorded a famine during the reign of Claudius were Dion Cassius and Josephus.

So, at the time Barnabas and Paul were discipling Christians, some prophets came from Jerusalem to Antioch.

One scholar pointed out that *Claudius*’ reign was marked by many bad harvests and serious famines in various parts of the Roman Empire.

Besides the famine, there was also **persecution** happening in Judea, which mainly came from the Jewish religious authorities against Christians within their reach.

Some of the Christians in Judea lost their fields, property, and homes before being imprisoned by the Pharisees and Sadducees.

Notice Agabus was shown *by the Spirit that there was going to be a great famine throughout all the world, which also happened in the days of Claudius Caesar.*

This is the first mention of the Spiritual gift of prophecy among the Christians, even though Agabus was already known as a prophet.

We will meet Agabus again in *Acts 21*, where he foretells how Paul will be delivered into the hands of the Gentiles during his third missionary journey.

The **gift** of prophecy described in *Ephesians 4* was a gift given by Christ, through the Holy Spirit, to proclaim a message from the Lord to the early believers.

Sometimes a prophet's message was a new revelation and truth, and sometimes a prophet's message was to predict something that would happen, like here in *Acts 11*.

These Christians did not have the New Testament at this time.

Some who say there are no longer prophets today state that after the writing of the New Testament, we no longer need new revelation because the Bible cannot be added to.

Others say modern-day prophets speak forth the Word of God.

Paul told his protégé Timothy in *2 Timothy 3:16 All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness,*

2 Timothy 3:17 that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work. NKJV

Here in our passage, Agabus told of a coming famine, and notice what the Christians from Antioch do: they jump into action to help by giving towards the needs of the believers in Judea.

Christians helping one another is emphasized all through the New Testament, and we are encouraged to love, support, and serve one another.

Helping one another is not always about giving money.

Some of the ways Christians help one another include sharing burdens, hospitality, and being a part of a caring community.

Paul said in ***Galatians 6:2, Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ. NKJV***

Skip to ***Galatians 6:10 Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all, especially to those who are of the household of faith. NKJV***

Jesus demonstrated His love in action all through the Gospels; He didn't just preach about love.

Remember the night He was arrested, Jesus washed the disciples' feet, and He even washed Judas' feet, knowing he would betray Him later that same night.

Jesus said in ***Matthew 20:27, Whoever desires to be first among you, let him be your slave —***

Matthew 20:28 just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many." NKJV

Through acts of service and helping one another, we show the love of Christ to a lost and hurting world.

Serving the body of Christ is a calling that reflects the heart of the Gospel. Jesus modeled service throughout His entire earthly ministry, and as His followers, we are called to do the same.

Through serving others, we also fulfill the command to love one another as we build up the body of Christ.

Given the nature of the coming famine, the church at Antioch must have believed that there would be a great need in Judea.

In *Acts*, Luke does not tell us how they reached this conclusion.

Notice in *Acts 11:29, Then the disciples, each according to his ability, NKJV*

Every Christian decided to give out of generosity, according to what they could, individually.

After the believers took up a special offering, it was ***“Sent it to the elders by the hands of Barnabas and Saul”***

Barnabas and Saul had earned the trust and respect of the believers in Antioch. *Who better to deliver the funds to Judea?*

Ironically, these Gentiles, even after their faith was previously questioned by them, helped ***those of the circumcision*** in need.

These believers held no bitterness for the past questioning of their faith by the Jewish believers.

James Montgomery Boice said, *“As far as I know, this is the first charitable act of this nature in all recorded history; one race of people collecting money to help another people.*

“No wonder they were first called Christians at Antioch.”

II. Government persecution.

Read *Acts 12:1-4*

Throughout Scripture, we read of different corrupt governments that both the Old Testament and New Testament lived under.

The Apostle Paul lived during the reigns of the Roman emperors Nero and Caligula, two of the worst tyrants in history.

Daniel lived under the rule of King Nebuchadnezzar.

Ironically, the Bible calls King Nebuchadnezzar God’s “servant” in *Jeremiah 25:9*, which obviously does not imply that Nebuchadnezzar was a godly man.

The LORD is sovereign over human events, even if we don’t recognize Him moving or understand what is happening.

Daniel 2:20 "Blessed be the name of God forever and ever, for wisdom and might are His.

Daniel 2:21 And He changes the times and the seasons; He removes kings and raises up kings. NKJV

In other words, no one can become a king, emperor, governor, president, assemblyman, or senator *apart from God's will*.

In our passage, we are introduced to Herod the king, eight years after the martyrdom of Stephen.

This man was Herod Agrippa I, the grandson of Herod the Great, who ruled during Jesus' birth. He was also the nephew of Herod Antipas, who was involved in the trial of Jesus.

Incidentally, he was also the brother of Herodias, the woman who asked for John the Baptist to be beheaded.

Most of the persecution the Church in Jerusalem was facing came from the Jewish religious leaders, but here we see the persecution comes from the civil leaders of the **government**.

At this point, at least for the short term, the Pharisees and Sadducees were not battling as much with Rome as before.

Some commentators believe Herod Agrippa wanted to persecute these Christians to appease the Jewish religious leaders there since he was appointed the new ruler of Judea and Samaria.

The James mentioned here was the son of Zebedee, also known as one of the Sons of Thunder, the brother of John, and one of the original Apostles.

His brother John, the beloved, lived the longest out of any of the Apostles. Later, John was exiled to the island of Patmos, where he received the ***Revelation*** of Jesus Christ.

Once James died, Herod saw that his death pleased the Jewish leadership, so he wanted to earn more favor with them; so, he also arrested Peter.

Notice this happened during the Passover celebration, where many visitors would have come to Jerusalem for the holiday.

Herod wanted to help the Pharisees show off zeal for the Law, making him popular with the Jewish religious leaders.

I wonder if, while Peter was in Prison during this holiday, he remembered how Jesus was taken into custody during the same time many years earlier, and so, it made prison easier to handle.

Later, while the **Apostle Paul** was in prison, he said...

Philippians 1:29 For to you it has been granted on behalf of Christ, not only to believe in Him, but also to suffer for His sake,

Philippians 1:30 having the same conflict which you saw in me and now hear is in me. NKJV

III. The Lord was there.

Read *Acts 12:5-11*

As Peter was in prison, what did the church do? They formed a committee and marched on Herod's temple. NO!!!

They prayed. Notice, *“Constant prayer was offered to God.”*

When we are going through the trials and heartaches of life, we should fix our eyes on Jesus and desire to be with Him as He desires to be with us.

Prayer is the most important task we do in times of worship, trials, and all other times of life.

Since we have a mediator who has granted us full access to the Father, we are confident when we go to Him in prayer.

Romans 8:34 It is Christ who died, and furthermore is also risen, who is even at the right hand of God, who also makes intercession for us. NKJV

We can be confident because we enjoy direct fellowship with the Lord. Jesus calls us friends, and so I feel very safe and confident talking to Him.

However, things don't always work out the way we plan. Here, Herod planned on executing Peter after the holiday, but the Lord had other plans.

Herod would not kill Peter during Passover. Once Sunday morning came, Peter's execution would not profane the holiday.

I want to point out yet another proof of Peter's transformation in Christ. Notice *vs. 6* says ***Peter was sleeping***.

Many of us would have been pacing back and forth, knowing that the civil leader of the area was going to order the death penalty for us as soon as the holiday was over.

Because Peter was filled with the Holy Spirit, he remembered the words of the Lord Jesus the night He was arrested before His crucifixion.

John 14:1 "Let not your heart be troubled; you believe in God, believe also in Me.

John 14:2 In My Father's house are many mansions; if it were not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you.

John 14:3 And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and receive you to Myself; that where I am, there you may be also. NKJV

Prior to Peter receiving the Spirit, he was on a boat in the middle of a storm and was very frightened, but Jesus was asleep.

Mark 4:36 Now when they had left the multitude, they took Him along in the boat as He was. And other little boats were also with Him.

Mark 4:37 And a great windstorm arose, and the waves beat into the boat, so that it was already filling.

Mark 4:38 But He was in the stern, asleep on a pillow. And they awoke Him and said to Him, "Teacher, do You not care that we are perishing?"

Mark 4:39 Then He arose and rebuked the wind, and said to the sea, "Peace, be still!" And the wind ceased, and there was a great calm.

Mark 4:40 But He said to them, "Why are you so fearful? How is it that you have no faith?"

Mark 4:41 And they feared exceedingly, and said to one another, "Who can this be, that even the wind and the sea obey Him!" NKJV

After he had the Holy Spirit, Peter was no longer scared to die, and he was so secure in the promise of Jesus Christ that he could sleep in the middle of a potential death sentence.

While Peter was sleeping, an angel showed up in his prison cell, struck him on the side, and told him it was time to go.

Oh, how I wish the Lord would send an angel every time I was unaware of His timing and purpose.

But Peter ***did not know that what was done by the angel was real, but thought he was seeing a vision.***

If you were dead asleep and an angel struck you on the side, you would probably think you were dreaming as well.

Notice the barriers Peter had to go through to return to the people in the Church who were praying for him.

There were barriers of soldiers, chains, guard posts, and an iron gate, but none of these things are stronger than our God!

Re-read ***Acts 12:11***

The Lord, in His own sovereign will, decided it was not time for Peter to die yet.

Hebrews 9:27 it is appointed for men to die once, but after this the judgment, NKJV

Death's odds are pretty impressive. One out of every one person will face physical death if the Lord should tarry.

As a Child of the Most High God, your time to go to heaven is not a mystery to Jesus; that time has been appointed.

You will not live one moment longer than the Lord has decided you to live, and you will not die before the appointed time either.

IV. Practical Application.

The Lord's sovereignty is shown clearly in this account in the ***Book of Acts***. Sometimes we don't understand what the Lord is doing, but He wants us to trust Him, even during uncertain times

Peter and James were arrested. The Lord allowed James to be put to death, but the Lord was not finished with Peter yet.

Later, Peter was crucified upside down, but here the Lord still had more for him to do. As Peter was in prison, the Church was praying for him, but he was at such peace, he slept in the cell.

Then an angel appeared. Here's the truth: The Lord cares enough to enter our lives before we even recognize Him.

The Lord is sovereign, and He has been working in our lives for a very long time, but a lot of us fail to **realize** it.

Then all of a sudden, we realize God was there the whole time.

Jesus comes into our lives and makes a huge difference, but until we surrender our hearts to the Lord, there is no good way for us to solve our problems.

Because Jesus is the answer to all life's questions and problems.

Like Horatio Spafford, the way the Early Church handled all the trials they faced revealed that they truly trusted in Jesus.

Peter was at peace in prison because he now realized that the Lord was in control, come what may. Peter remembered the words of Jesus when He promised heaven to His followers.

Some people today would say, *"I believe I am going to heaven someday because my good deeds outweigh my bad deeds"*.

But allow me to ask you a logical question this morning, if heaven truly is a perfect place and God were to let even one imperfect person in, no matter how good they were...

Would heaven be perfect any longer?

You see, being good isn't good enough, and everybody in the world has blown it once in their life.

Matthew 5:48 Therefore, you shall be perfect, just as your Father in heaven is perfect. NKJV

In high school, I loved teachers who graded on a curve. They took the lowest and the highest grades into account for grades.

Many people think I have never killed anyone, so I am pretty good, and God will grade me on the curve to get into heaven.

But the Bible is clear, heaven is a perfect place, so *what can we do?* The Lord loves you and He desires you to be in heaven someday, but you have imperfections that the Bible calls sin.

God is just, and if He were to look past our sin, He would be wrong, so someone has to pay for our sin.

2 Corinthians 5:21 For He made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him. NKJV

God sent His only Son, Jesus, to take the death penalty of the Cross on our behalf so that we could receive a right standing before God.

Our heavenly Father has perfect love, and He wants us to experience perfect joy. That kind of joy comes from a clear conscience, knowing our sins have been **forgiven**.

Our response to the message this morning is a personal one; if you do not have peace or assurance of where you will go when you die...I want you to come down and let us pray for you

Don't leave here this morning without knowing for sure that you have a relationship with the Lord. This life is simply a dress rehearsal for where you will spend eternity.

He wants to give you beauty for ashes from the sinful life of regret to an abundant life in Him. God has a plan, and He is working out His plan according to His will. So, trust Him!