

10/30/22 - Acts 11:19-30 - "Seeing God's Hand Upon the Church"

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Date: 30 October 2022

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[0 : 00] Good morning. All right. We will be reading from Acts 11, verses 19 to 30. And again, we are using the ESV. Verse 19. Yeah, okay. I see you're there. Okay. Verse 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. 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. And the hand of the Lord was with them, and a great number who believed turned to the Lord.

The report of this came to the ears of the church in Jerusalem, and they sent Barnabas to Antioch. 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. For he was a good man full of the Holy Spirit and of faith, and a great many people were added to the Lord. So Barnabas went to Tarsus to look for Saul. 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. Now in these days, prophets came down from Jerusalem to Antioch, and one of them, named Agabus, stood up and foretold by the Holy Spirit that there would be a great famine over all the world. This took place in the days of Claudius.

So the disciples determined everyone, according to his ability, to send relief to the brothers living in Judea. And they did so, sending it to the elders by the hand of Barnabas and Saul. That is the word of the Lord.

Amen. Thank you, David. It's an honor to serve with you here at Steel Valley Church. And just, it's always funny when we say good morning, because I always feel like I have an evaluation, like, let's see how they're doing, which is just, I think, by habit. And so that's why I was smirking when David said good morning, because he had this evaluation, like, okay. All right, so I just wanted to clear the air on that, just so my conscience can be clear on that. It is so great to be in this point in the book of Acts. We've come such a long way. The gospel has come such a long way.

This has been very cinematic in different scenes and scenarios and trials and triumphs and ups and downs, lefts or rights. And it has been a remarkable series thus far. I pray that this has been producing fruit, if at all anything, faith that what we represent and what we believe truly is rooted in history. And it is real, it is worth giving our lives for. This is something tangible to have faith in. It's not some story and folklore as we might, as a culture may consider it to be.

[3 : 59] And so I want us to reflect upon a question today. What I want us to say is how do we see the hand of God working in a church?

How do we see the hand of God working in a church? Seems pretty much easy, kind of a silly question to ask, but is it really?

To think about a question like that would beg us to think, well, how do we know for certain that what is going on within a church is not based on somebody's specific character or competencies?

Or maybe the character or competencies of a few assembled leaders that if those leaders left, all would fall apart.

How do we see and identify the hand of God working in a church? In other words, how do we distinguish the hand of God versus the hand of man?

[5 : 14] The text we reach today takes us 300 miles north of Jerusalem. That's basically from here to Cincinnati.

Think about walking that distance in the city known as Antioch. I want us to picture this city this morning, Antioch.

Antioch. This is a city that's positioned in such a geographical advantaged location with many roads that lead to and from.

It's like this epicenter of trading of this day. It's ripe for trade life. And Antioch was a Roman city. It's lavished in wealth.

It's lavished in beauty. Antioch. Consider the main road of Antioch, if you could picture in your mind. A giant expanse of a road, 100 feet wide.

[6 : 19] And then along that road on each side are over 3,000 marble columns going down that road.

Each side having colonnades, porticos on each side of the road. And this city had a gate to this giant road.

It had this gate that had the Roman she-wolf decorated beautifully upon the gate. If you've paid attention in your English class of Greek mythology, we know exactly what was going on here.

The city was 1,100 blocks in total. These blocks were 200 by 400 feet.

This was a big, massive, beautiful, wealthy city. An epicenter of trade. Religiously speaking, Antioch was very influenced by Greek pagan gods and mythology.

[7 : 34] Gods and goddesses. Zeus, Apollo, Ares, Poseidon, you name it. It was represented in this city.

And it would be in this vibrant city known as Antioch that a vibrant church would take root and become established.

Not only that, it would be established, but it would also be guided by God. The hand of God would be on that church.

And not only that, the hand would guide that church to serve as a relief to surrounding churches. This was Antioch.

And the passage today gives us a description of what it looked like for the hand of God to be on a church. And its regional effects.

[8 : 37] I believe this passage will give us the discernment and the courage to see the hand of God working in our midst today as well.

And give us a guideline of what to look for. And so let's pray as we go into this passage. And allow the Word of God to speak to us today.

Let's pray. Lord, humble us under Your mighty hand at this time. Father, may the stresses that exist in our lives outside of this wall not impede our sense of hearing within these walls.

Let us hear You speak today. Use my voice as a mouthpiece for Your Word to speak to Your church.

And we pray this in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. Amen. The sermon title today is, Seeing God's Hand Upon the Church.

[9 : 48] And I'm going to break this up into three sections of passage as is identified within this passage.

And so the first section of the passage today, we're going to see God's hand and the role of preaching.

Verse 19, just as it was read this morning, it says, 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 the Jews.

If I could summarize this, the emotional state of those who were scattered, it would be fear.

Those who were scattered were fearful of what just took place. It's been a while. I mean, this is referring to something back in Luke's writing back to chapter 8 of his narrative.

[10 : 57] And this is a reminder, after all this time we spent with the Apostle Peter's mission of evangelizing and breaking down cultural walls and ushering in the movement of the gospel throughout all the regions, we get a reality check of what was going on.

A reminder of where we came. We're taken back to the horrific stoning, visually speaking, at the mention of Stephen's name.

This is back in Acts 8, back before Saul's conversion to Christianity. Luke writes that Saul approved of his execution in Acts 1.

And there arose on that day a great persecution against the church in Jerusalem. And they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles.

It continues, Saul was ravaging the church. And entering house after house, he dragged off men and women and committed them to prison.

[12 : 10] And we cannot forget, church, that the spread of the church occurred paradoxically. It makes no sense by way of persecution.

And we see that scattering and that paradox occurring in Antioch today. The gospel has reached Antioch on behalf of the persecution.

A church is thriving because of persecution. And we see a theological reality between persecution and the health of a church.

This is certainly true when we observe the unexplainable growth in hostile countries today. If you read Voice of the Martyrs magazine and are informed of things that are going on in other countries long away, where the government is hostile towards Christians and anybody associated with the gospel of Jesus Christ, we see the gospel is actually pretty vibrant in these areas.

The same is true then as it is today. And Luke describes this scattering of Christians to all over the region and the apparent fear of constantly losing their lives.

[13 : 34] Fear in this scattering. However, Luke takes a pause. In my mind, I imagine you're looking with one of those magnifying glass all over the map and he just stops and he zooms into Antioch.

You see it? Luke takes a pause upon Antioch and specifically the hand of God working mightily in the city. Verse 20 talks about it. But there were some, some of this scattering, men of Cyprus and Cyrene, who on coming to Antioch spoke to the Hellenists.

And they were also preaching the Lord Jesus Christ. This is remarkable because the very Hellenists that stone Stephen are the ones that are being evangelized today in this passage.

And it would be here that the supreme God, the God over all, the Almighty, the Alpha and Omega, this is where the supreme God, in contrast to all the pagan Greek gods, would make his grand debut in Antioch.

And by way of God's providence amid persecution, God guided the gospel throughout the regions and established a church in this city.

[15 : 12] How? Preaching the Lord Jesus Christ. And look at the effect of it. And the hand of the Lord was with them.

And a great number who believed turned to the Lord. Boy, you think that I do this for my health Sunday after Sunday.

And us elders who are called to preach and teach. No, we do this because God has called us to strengthen you. And this church was established by way of preaching.

The church was founded not only on the blood and the sweat and tears of the early church in persecution, but also that of proclamation. Proclamation. We see the dual role of proclamation has sort of two sides.

The world hates the proclamation and the church depends on it. This is how God's hand established the church in Antioch.

[16 : 18] And the same is true of how we're established today in our day and age. Sermons. Opening up the word. Living the word.

Hearing and doing the word. This is how God establishes the church. You want to know if the hand of God is upon us?

Are we resting in the daily, weekly diet of God's word? Are we established and fulfilled?

Truly fulfilled by the preaching of the Lord Jesus Christ? You see, the word of God is the steady anchor in trial and triumph.

It is the constant in the dispersion of all of these Jews from Jerusalem, these Christians from Jerusalem. And it's also that consistent anchor, even in the triumph, of look at what God's doing in Antioch.

[17 : 31] Since the foundation of the world, God had in mind to transform Antioch. Think about this. The foundation of the world.

God saw Antioch at this time. God saw Antioch at this time. God saw Antioch at this time. God saw Antioch at this time. God saw Antioch at this time. And through Jesus Christ, those who believe the gospel turned from their pagan gods and goddesses, their idols, and they turned to the one true God.

We are then confident today that if I proclaim today and there's any fruit produced, it is not I, but Christ.

And similarly, if you are gathered here today uncertain of forgiveness and pardon in your life, you can be assured of it.

Because God set this day in your life, if you are apart from Him, to be within Savior's embrace.

[18 : 41] This is a day set aside for you if you are not a Christian, to embrace the gospel. Abandon, as the Word of God calls us, to abandon all, all of our wicked ways, all of our rebellion, whether it's known to us or unknown to us.

Even if we're ignorant of the rebellion. The Bible says that from birth, we are in rebellion to God. And at some point, when we have breath in our lungs, from our birth to our death, we ought to come to Jesus Christ by way of the gospel and turn from that rebellion to the living and true God.

So abandon our wicked ways and embrace His forgiveness. That Jesus Christ accomplished for you by faith. Just as the Reformation tenant is founded upon.

At this time in the passage, it's like, I don't know how words spread necessarily to the greatest detail.

I didn't study that. But what I can recall is that something was going on. It's like, reports came back. Barnabas, did you read the papers?

[20 : 05] Did you hear what is going on in Antioch? Look what's going on. We need to go out there and see what's happening. This is Antioch.

Do you hear me? Antioch. That Greek, loving, spiritually based society of pagan idolatry.

And so we come to the second section of God's hand and the role of leadership. And the report of this came to the ears of the church in Jerusalem.

And they sent Barnabas to Antioch. And when he came, he saw the grace of God and he was glad and he exhorted them all in, all to remain faithful to the Lord with steadfast purpose.

For he was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and of faith. And a great many people were added to the Lord. The report came to the ears of the church in Jerusalem.

[21 : 16] If you remember our point last week, the rumors and rumors of rumors spread. But these are the good rumors.

These are the praise reports. The sending of Barnabas, I don't believe, was some sort of prescription for our day to day to advocate for sort of this campus church quality controller guy that sits over all the churches and goes in to check on their doctrine.

However, God did a special work through the apostolic body as context indicates. And the apostolic body was specifically responsible for the gospel expansion in these days.

There was a preservation, a very protection upon the gospel of Jesus Christ in these early days as the foundation is being set for the church.

And so, look what Barnabas witnessed. It was an undeniable miracle of God. Imagine walking into this city, seeing the marble columns along the streets and going into this church probably waiting to meet some guy dressed up like Poseidon and some altar that has Poseidon on the cross and some confusing rendition of the gospel.

[22 : 49] And what he saw was the grace of God. Why? Because the grace of God reached to this pagan city.

To those who would look nothing like a Christian in this day. God extended his grace. That's the grace of God that he saw.

I believe he responded how we would all probably respond upon walking into this uncertain situation and then be pleasantly surprised, right? He was glad. And he exhorted them, encouraged them, all to remain faithful to the Lord with steadfast purpose.

Faithful to the Lord with steadfast purpose. How else would a Christian's faithfulness to God be done apart remaining true to their faith?

In other words, beholding, remaining in the crucified Messiah, remaining in the risen Savior, remaining in the exalted Lord and Savior over all, and becoming a new creature under the reigning Lord.

[24 : 20] Lord, what a sense of encouragement that would be so direly needed in such a pagan-filled culture in Antioch. Do not deviate to the left or to the right.

Stay on the path. They weren't out for selfish gain. They didn't come to Antioch just like modern-day philosophers would back in those days and periods and time.

They didn't try to wow the crowds and come in with this public spectacle of, like, receive Jesus Christ and fill my pockets with money.

That's all I want is that money. This is what the philosophers did in this time. They would try to win over leading families with their wisdom and their intellect and their cross references from here to there and their brilliance and sophisticated way of speech.

It's prevalent today. I just described many number of our false teachers that fill our world today. This church, though, is to remain faithful to the Lord with steadfast purpose.

[25 : 40] Barnabas saw and witnessed these Christian missionaries having a complete different value system and priority. And I'm sure Barnabas would have had sharp words for those even in our day today, those who prostitute the name of Jesus Christ for financial gain.

No, God had His hand upon this church. church. And the message and motives were obvious. God called a leader to strengthen them.

Verse 25, So Barnabas went to Tarsus to look for Saul. And when he found him, he brought him to Antioch.

Notice how we, it's not really explicit here, but to look for somebody, it's like where in the world is Saul. It's almost like there was a search that occurred that was a little bit confusing to Barnabas.

You would expect him to know where he is. Well, Saul, changed by the gospel, is hitting the streets. Where in the world is Saul? Look to the guy who's probably on a street corner preaching to the masses about faith alone in Jesus Christ.

[27 : 06] The gospel changes us in ways that we would never, ever expect or anticipate in our lives. And for a whole year, he brings him back to Antioch for a whole year to meet with the church and taught a great number, great many people.

And in Antioch, the disciples were first called Christians. Don't we usually have a hard time with having oversight in our lives?

Having somebody telling us what to do? I don't think we naturally are inclined to being like, oh, okay. I think there's some sort of pushback in our humanity where we're just like, you ain't going to tell me what to do.

Who are you? What, you're 35? You've got years on you. And it's almost as if we have this natural problem with having oversight, but how dearly we need it.

God called a leader to strengthen this church. A church that may have thought that they were good, but they had half the element missing.

[28 : 28] They were established, the gospel was proclaiming, but they were missing something. They were missing oversight. Barnabas saw the need for this church to mature and be strengthened and recruited Saul to help lead the discipleship efforts.

Amazing, right? This is Saul. I would imagine there was a little bit of fear watching Saul come into town with a Torah in his hand.

man. I would imagine the man who is responsible for the scattering of the church is now responsible for the gathering of the church.

The gospel changes everything. This is the grace of God. And these Christians would become an official assembly, not just some little social club that meets in the basements that the government's checking in.

Okay, yep, you guys are using the facilities, right? No, this became quite an organized group of believers to the point where the world would derogatorily, is that a word?

[29 : 36] Would make a derogative turn, we'll rephrase that, to this gathering and call them Christians. It was official.

They have taken root, they have been established, and they were called and known by the world as Christians. That's the term that we know today. In other words, they met, they gathered like this, and they taught corporately like this.

You see, the in-person assembly of the church is where the church exists. Don't forget this. COVID can't redefine that.

Those who hide on the live stream week after week after week. God did not design that. God designed this. Where the church is, is where the assembled body of believers are.

Where the assembled body of believers are, is where the church is. And in Antioch, that's where they were. Wherever they assembled.

[30 : 49] We don't need this building. Beautiful building, mind you. Great parking lot. We don't need it. If God gives it to us, praise the Lord. But we don't need any of it.

We can be just as effective under that sycamore tree over in the woods as we can be here. As long as we're doing it God's way. All this to say, how was God's hand upon the church?

God's hand was on the church leaders who assemble them corporately under the proclaimed Word of God. Why? To strengthen them, to encourage them, to equip them.

That is how we know that God's hand is prevalent in working on the church. Christianity was dependent upon it. Not podcasts.

not detaching from all church due to your problem with tradition and everything and just throwing everything out.

[31 : 57] Not going up to the mountaintop and hiding in a cave and just you and God and that's it. No. There's a time for solitude.

There's a time for that. But we must never neglect the corporate gathering of the church. The corporate church life is vital to our strengthening as Christians.

It's a wonder why it's so hard to sometimes get us here. Because the devil don't want us here. You don't always like what the doctor has to say, do you? Nor is it the same for a pastor.

You don't always like what the pastor has to say. But it is true. The church life is Christian life. The Christian life is church life.

The gathered church is the church and to see this is to see God's hands at work. And then lastly, as we get to the last section, we see a little bit of turmoil approaching the days of this time period.

[33 : 04] And it says in verse 27, as we look at God's hand in the role of outreach. Verse 27 says, Now in these days prophets came down from Jerusalem to Antioch.

Obviously, they weren't privy to what we have found within the Word of God today. And so, the message would be carried. And one of them, one of these prophets, carried that revelation.

his name Agabus. He 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. Being just recently through a season of great uncertainty, I'll say it again, the C word, COVID, we can probably all relate to receiving the news.

As we see the spread occurring across seas in China and then Italy, and then all of a sudden I'm getting texts from people saying, what are we doing? There's something going on here. And I'm like, what's going on here?

[34 : 17] Nobody knew what was going on. It was a time of uncertainty. Receiving that news that would have devastating effects upon the world. This is the news that they received.

Not by the news channel, but by God speaking to the church and saying, prepare. This is coming. This was the prophetic message that was delivered to the church in Antioch to send relief to God's churches all throughout this region.

And God did it this way. And so we can hit the elephant in the room confidently, whether you're a cessationist or a continuationist or whatever you categorize yourself in.

If you don't know those terms, you're better off not knowing them because just be biblical. We confuse things so much. We know that the foundation of the church is built on the apostles and the prophets, Ephesians 2.20.

And God gave the apostles, the prophets, evangelists, shepherds, and teachers to equip the saints for the work and the ministry, for the building up of the church. We see there is something unique in this time period that we have bound and complete within our hands today.

[35 : 27] It's a prophetic word of God. And this is how God speaks to His church divinely. And so God prophetically guides His church, superior through the Word of God.

And so whether it being through divine prophetic revelation through the Word of God, or in everyday circumstances that God may deem necessary to help us, God forbid us ever losing sight of God's intimate relationship with us, how He sometimes reminds us in this life of upcoming circumstances, however He sees fit.

God has spoken through a donkey. He can speak through however He wants to speak. And He does it His way.

But how much greater confidence we know that we are not alone in this life. We have COVID, there could be another COVID, another pandemic, and everything like that, but if God wants to use this church in some extraordinary means out there, I believe fully that God will reveal it to us.

God does what He wants, and He is supreme. And so just as things may occur through subjective experience as prophecy today, or maybe just wise intuition that God gives us through the Holy Spirit, we know that the church is called to test the spirits, lest we quench the spirits.

[37 : 16] The specific prophecy, however, in this day, it was received, and guess what? Luke went to a little bit of a length to say that it actually came true.

Dinner, new? This took place in the days of Claudius. Go ahead and Google that on your Sunday afternoon of what took place in those days. It was received, tested, and actually came true.

And the episode ends, indicating that this wealthy Antioch church would send relief during the coming food shortage. Verse 29 says, So the disciples determined everyone according to his ability to send relief to the brothers living in Judea.

And they did so, sending it to the elders by the hand of Barnabas and Saul. What occurs in Antioch? God used the disciples of the church.

Don't skip over that. This is huge. He used the disciples of the church, the congregation of the church, to organize themselves and to get care packages ready.

[38 : 40] And they would be sent to, look at this word, elders of other churches. And who's the delivery boys? Barnabas and Saul.

You start seeing these images of how God has organized his church in a specific way that exceeds how Facebook corporate structure is set up or some other organization, CEO, executive board level and everything like that.

God has instituted a organized group of believers in such a way that is good for us and we ought to remain there.

We see one of the first mentions in the book of elders overseeing a church. In all these relief efforts, it didn't happen through, hey elders, knock, knock, knock.

We should probably do this and do that. Well, a good elder will probably say, go ahead and do it. Let's get a team together and let's do it.

[39 : 53] Right? How many of us kind of just send our good ideas out, just fly them up the flagpole and just say, okay, make it so, I'm going to go home now. And I mean, after all, you get paid to do it, so you got more time than me.

But it's not how God designed it. They organized, the congregation organized these care packages. The elders were overseeing churches all around and the care packages were received.

Look at Antioch? No. Look at God. God was supremely responsible for guiding the church through persecution and proclamation and preparing them for the coming famine and protecting them within the famine.

Not just Antioch, but also churches all around. how often we miss God's hand at work. It's like if someone shares some insight into a church decision or direction or maybe an upcoming danger of something that's going to occur within the life of this church if we don't take precautions now, that we suddenly crown that person as, oh, they are the prophets.

Or, put them in some category of some superior spiritual category. Or, on the other side, if the elders make a right decision or a church becomes dependent upon them or if, man, that sermon is hidden and you spoke right to me, I'm going to crown you as the prophet.

[41 : 47] You are the guy. I only want to hear the word from you. Not from any of these guys around here. Just you. That my spiritual walk is so dependent upon this piece of wood and this mouth that God forbid I ever get hit by a bus or pass away and go into heaven someday that all the everyone's faith is going to fall apart.

How often we miss God's hand. Simply to say, in these days, God spoke and the church acted.

The mission of the church is empowered by God and carried out by its members and with elder oversight. This is good.

This is how God organized us. So, if this church, Steel Valley Church, might be so blessed to experience numerical growth, evangelistic growth, we know for certain it will not be contingent upon a piece of wood or some spiritual soul that sits within our midst.

Right? It's not contingent upon our structures and our parking lot and our food pantry and all the things that we're doing.

[43 : 14] that kind of church will not withstand a pandemic. That type of church will not withstand a famine. Steel Valley Church, I am encouraged, truly has.

Might this invigorate our human responsibility with the church's mission and expand our hearts to others around.

At different evangelical churches all around, they might not wear the same cool coat as us or they might not preach from the same translation as us or they might be those continuationists or the cessationists and whatever the reformers or the, you know, whatever you want to call them, all these things that can divide us.

This invigorates our responsibility to be cooperative with other churches as well, not compromising on the gospel. The gospel unites what it needs to unite and it divides what needs divided.

But we ought to expand our hearts to those who we are going to be worshiping God in glory someday based on the tenets of the reformation, the five solas, and to be dependent only, dependent upon by other churches if need be, that we might be the relief that our brothers and sisters need around.

[44 : 43] We have a saying in this church, we are His church. You've probably heard that, seen that. If you're new with us today, you've probably seen that somewhere on our website.

We are His church. What does that mean? Four words can be very profound. sound. But this simply says that we act when God leads.

We go regardless of how we feel and we love unconditionally just as Christ loved us. And so as we come to a close and we wrap things up today, may we never miss the hand of God working within our midst.

God may we never miss it because we're neglecting to assemble together around the preaching of God's Word.

May we never miss it because we're rejecting the God-given leaders who are appointed to oversee us in our lives. May we never miss the hand of God working within our midst because we're abandoning the interconnectivity of the regional body of Jesus Christ.

[46 : 05] I love how Reggie McNeil states in his book Missional Renaissance, he says, we don't have to manufacture the work of God in ourselves or in the world. God is doing the heavy lifting.

Isn't that true? We can quit trying to drum up a breeze by gathering a lot of frantic, fanatic church activity, and instead simply just hoist our sails up in the air and catch the breeze that's already blowing.

How wonderful to know that the hand of God is here, the hand of God is working. The breeze is already blowing. We as a church are responsible of raising our sail to catch the breeze to His destination.

I can't say it enough, church. Don't miss God working. Don't miss it.

As Christians, God saves us through justification and regeneration. And upon those, we're pretty confirmed that we will receive a promised inheritance based on that.

[47 : 23] But it doesn't end with just justification and regeneration. There's this process afterwards called sanctification. Some today may be missing the hand of God because by missing and neglecting assembling, missing the authority placed over us, and missing this interconnectivity of one another and those around, we're missing the process of sanctification.

glorification. We're missing the process of glorification that we await in our lives. Don't miss the other half of the Christian life either, lest we jeopardize our very profession of faith actually being a facade.

So maybe cling to the hand of God working, prioritizing our assembly around preaching, obeying God-given leaders appointed for us and partnering in the interconnectivity of the regional body of Jesus Christ.

This is God's design for the church. Let's pray. Let's pray.