

GOD'S SAVING PURPOSES PREVAIL THUS DISPLAYING HIS POWER AND GRACE

Acts 11:19-30

INTRODUCTION

Every Sunday we begin our worship service by stating the purpose and mission of our church. When a church or any organization or even any individual human being states their purpose they are answering the question: why do we (or I) exist? As a church we, on the basis of God's word, have said that our purpose, our reason for existence is "to display the greatness of God." We believe that the ultimate purpose or reason for us existing as a local church is to make plain and obvious that the invisible God who made all things and holds all things together and who sent our Lord Jesus Christ into the world is great and glorious and awesome. It is, without question, a pretentious purpose. I mean, who do we think we are to believe that our existence and how we live together can in any way make the glory of the almighty God manifest in the world?

The reason we have adopted such an ostentatious purpose is because this is what the Bible says is the ultimate purpose of the local church. Listen to what God says through the apostle Paul in Ephesians 3:10, (God's) "intent was that now, through the church, the manifold wisdom of God should be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms in accord with his eternal purpose which he accomplished in Christ." Right now, it is God's purpose, which is an eternal purpose, to make known through the existence of the church how smart he is. Our existence as a church makes God's wisdom known in the universe in a way it would not be known without us. This is why God has called us into existence and why he continues to sustain our existence as River Hills Community Church. Our first and ultimate purpose for existence is not benefiting people but first to show forth the greatness of God.

We also state our mission every Sunday morning. Our mission statement explains how we intend to display the greatness of God. Again, this statement is rooted in what the Bible has to say. Our mission is to display God's greatness by declaring his greatness and serving others for joy and his honor. As I studied the passage for this morning's sermon I became very excited as I discovered that this text shows that the purpose of the local church is to display the greatness of God and it describes how it is that local churches and the Christians that inhabit those churches display or make obvious the greatness of God.

First of all, let's see that this text does indeed show that the greatness of God is being revealed or made public. There are four statements in this brief narrative that tell us that the glory of the invisible God is being made visible in and through the church in Antioch and Jerusalem. First, in v. 21 we are told that the Lord's hand was with this group of anonymous Cyprian and Cyrenian Christians who had come to Antioch. The evidence that God's hand was with them is that a great number of people believed the gospel and turned to the Lord. The birth of a church in Antioch demonstrated God's presence and power. Second, when Barnabas, the emissary from the church in Jerusalem came to Antioch we are told, in v. 23 that he saw the grace of God. As he witnessed this church of Gentiles believing in Jesus and loving one another he saw the grace of God and as a result he rejoiced in the Lord, he worshipped. This is, by the way, the reason God aims to display his glory through the church. He aims to provoke our joy in him so that we joyfully worship him. Third, at the end of v. 26 we are told that it was here, in Antioch that the followers of Jesus were first called Christians. Who called them Christians? The implication is that the non-Christian community in Antioch gave them this name. Think about what that means. This means that the non-believers in Antioch knew that Christ was the center of attention and affection of this church. It means that the idol worshipping pagans of Antioch knew who he was and they knew that he was considered great and glorious and that these "Christians" were willing to renounce the pleasures and comforts of this world in order to belong to him because that is what the word means: those who belong to Christ. Fourth, when the prophets come down from Jerusalem and one of them, a guy named Agabus foretells that a great famine is going to come upon the Roman Empire, he does so by or through the Spirit. In other words, this prophecy and then the response of the church to it, makes visible the presence and

work of the Spirit of God. So Luke, in recording this story for us shows how God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit shows off his greatness and glory through the church. We are going to see four ways he does this and I want you to compare these four ways to our own mission statement.

MAIN POINT

The power and grace of God are made visible when...

I. Christians continue to follow Christ in the face of great trouble (vv. 19-20)

Verse 19 is another example of what a masterful storyteller Luke is. This verse takes us back to Acts 8:4 (read 8:1-4). It takes us back to the days immediately following the martyrdom of Stephen. It is a classic story-telling technique that describes a separate but related story line that is parallel to and contingent upon the events recorded in chapters 8-11:18. Our movies and TV shows are full of this technique. We will be shown what is happening to one character and then we will be taken to another character to whom something different is happening in the same time frame and which, as we discover later, was directly related to the first character's story. While Philip goes to Samaria and then to the desert to meet the Ethiopian eunuch and while Saul of Tarsus goes to Damascus and is confronted by Jesus on the road, and while Peter goes to Joppa and then to Cornelius in Caesarea, other believers who were driven out of Jerusalem because of the persecutions associated with Stephen's martyrdom go north along the coast of the Mediterranean Sea in Phoenicia, which is modern day Lebanon and out to the island of Cyprus, 100 miles to the west of Phoenicia and finally to the third largest city in the Roman Empire, the city of Antioch located along the Oconte River, 20 miles inland from the NE corner of the Mediterranean Sea.

As these exiled and homeless Jewish Christians travelled from city to city they were explaining the good news about Jesus but only to Jews. They, like their Christian brothers in Jerusalem and Judea, yet believed that entry into the kingdom of God not only required faith in Jesus but also being Jewish. It was outside of their theology and their expectation to think that fully Gentile people could become Christians without becoming Jewish. Therefore, they carried out their evangelism within the Jewish synagogues in each community they came to. However, something happened in Antioch. In that city, Jewish Christians from the island of Cyprus and from Cyrene (the capital of the Roman province in north Africa) began to tell the gospel to Greek speaking Gentiles, non-Jews. Luke does not tell us why they began to do this. Perhaps they had heard about the conversion of the Samaritans and Cornelius. Perhaps, as they were continuing to read the Scriptures and think about all that Jesus had said they came to the conclusion that the gospel was for Gentiles as well as Jews. Whatever the reason the Lord's hand was with them just as he was with Peter when he preached to the Gentiles in Cornelius' home and a great number of people believed their word and turned to the Lord Jesus. We must recognize that this action of preaching to Gentiles was a radical act of obedience to Jesus. It was full of risk both because they had no idea how Greeks would respond to them, Jewish people openly seeking to convert people to Christ and they did have some idea as to how their fellow Jewish Christians might respond to their crossing this boundary.

So the main thing that strikes me in these actions is that these exiled, homeless people, rather than bemoaning their condition and simply looking for a safe place to settle down and live out their lives proclaim the same gospel that got them driven out of Jerusalem to the same kinds of people who drove them out, the Jews and they also took the bold and radical step to preach to Gentiles. Their actions prove that Jesus is indeed a treasure for which a person will sell all he or she has in order to possess. They exemplify something that the apostle Peter says in his first letter as the conclusion to his instructions to Christians who were suffering. He says, "So then, those who suffer according to God's will should commit themselves to their faithful Creator and continue to do good." When those who have lost health or wealth or children or freedom or success talk about the glory of Jesus and live in obedience to him, then his value and worth are clearly manifested. As Paul says, his grace is made perfect in our weakness. The only explanation for why people who have suffered great loss yet rejoice in a good and loving God and continue to obey him in ways that could lead to more loss is that God has made himself glorious to those people.

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- *And when...*

II. People believe the gospel and are changed by it (vv. 21-23)

The phrase, “the hand of the Lord” is regularly used in the OT. Obviously, God does not have a hand. This is a metaphor, an “anthropomorphism”, that is, using a human characteristics to aid in understanding something about God. It is with our hands that we perform our work and so when the hand of the Lord is mentioned we are to understand that God is at work. In the OT whenever the hand of the Lord is mentioned there is an effect in the visible world attributed to his hand, such as, the plagues on Egypt, the parting of the Jordan River, the plans for the temple that David gave to Solomon, the courage of Ezra to leave Babylon and go to Palestine without military escort, to name a few. Here we see that the effect of the hand of the Lord being with the anonymous Christians who preached in Antioch is that a large number of Greek speaking Gentiles believed and turned to the Lord. These Gentiles placed their faith in Christ to rescue them from sin and death and hell and they turned to the Lord because of their faith.

The phrase, “turning to the Lord” is used a number of times in the NT. Usually this turning to the Lord is indicated by some change in behavior and/or affection or attitude. Several times it is used to describe that turning from the worship of idols to the worship of the living God, thus showing that there is a very different religious practice and belief structure adopted. People who have turned to the Lord no longer go to the pagan temples or participate in the various religious ceremonies associated with those temples. Rather, their religious practices are in accord with the teaching of the Bible. Also people are said to turn from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God. There is a new way of viewing the world and new allegiances. Then in that great metaphor in 1 Peter 2:25, we are described as lost and wandering sheep that have now turned to the shepherd of our souls. We are those who now follow Jesus and not our own desires and ambitions.

As I mentioned earlier, when Barnabas arrived in Antioch he, the text literally says, “saw the grace of God”. That is a remarkable statement. He saw the unmerited favor of God. How did he see it? He saw it in the transformed lives of these Gentile Christians. He saw men and women and children who used to frequent the temples of idols and used to be overcome with all the superstitions of that false worship not going to the temples anymore or living in fear of the capricious gods anymore. He saw them gathering together to worship Jesus in song and prayer and to listen to the word of God taught. He saw them not seeking revenge on their enemies and not engaging in sexual immorality and not lying and stealing anymore. He saw them caring for the poor and teaching their children about Christ and husbands loving their wives as Christ loved the church and children honoring their parents and workers and slaves doing their work with all their might as though serving Christ and not men and masters and employers treating their slaves and employees with respect and consideration. When liars and drunks and the sexually immoral and gossips and worriers and the angry turn from these wicked behaviors and live self-controlled and upright lives it is not due to their own effort or goodness but due to God’s unmerited favor.

A couple of years after I came to faith in Christ I was working as a carpenter for a general contractor. I was his only regular employee but he would hire temporary guys every once in a while. After I worked with one of the temporary workers for a couple of weeks he said to me, “You never swear. Why is that?” I told him that “I used to swear as much as he did but that a couple of years ago Jesus had saved me. He gave me a new heart and new desires when he forgave my sins. Nobody told me to stop swearing, I just did because of God’s work in me.” While this guy didn’t know it, he was seeing the grace of God. It is through our faith in Jesus, which is a gift of God’s grace and which leads us to take risks and to love others and to avoid sin that God puts his greatness on display. Barnabas’ seeing the grace of God forces this question upon us: When people look at you, when they look at us, do they see the grace of God?

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III. Christians fulfill their ministry (vv. 23-28)

The 100% Jewish church in Jerusalem hears that there is a church in Antioch that is mostly Gentile. They send one of the most trusted men in the Jerusalem church, a man from Cyprus who had proven himself loyal to Christ and generous with God's people. They sent him to make sure the gospel was being correctly taught and to return with a report to them. Most likely Barnabas' being sent was after Peter's report concerning the conversion of Cornelius. When Barnabas arrives and sees the grace of God he not only rejoices but he immediately begins to encourage these new believers to remain true to the Lord with their whole hearts. If you will remember his name means "son of encouragement" and so true to his name he encourages these new believers. He immediately exercises the spiritual gifts he has been given by God for the benefit of these Christians. He is not at a loss as to what needs to be done when he arrives on the scene. He knows what the church needs and he knows he can deliver what it needs. His ministry to this new church reaps immediate results as a great number of people were added to the church upon his arrival.

If we were to ask what made his ministry so effective we will find the answer in v. 24: he was a good man, full of the HS and faith. It is not the skill of Barnabas, the gifted preaching ability that is the reason for his effectiveness but rather it is his grace created character and the presence of the HS and the example of his faith in Jesus that stand behind the effectiveness of his ministry. As Barnabas works among these Gentile people he remembers Saul the persecutor who was converted on the road to Damascus and told by Jesus that he was going to be his messenger to the Gentiles. He also remembers that Tarsus, the hometown of Saul to which he had gone following his appearance in Jerusalem some years ago was but a short trip across the corner of the Mediterranean Sea from Antioch. So, in light of Saul's call to preach to the Gentiles and in light of the increasing need for additional help among the Gentiles in Antioch, Barnabas leaves and goes to Tarsus and finds Saul and brings him back. As a result, the work goes forward with increased effectiveness as they teach a large and growing congregation of mainly Gentile Christians the gospel. It is in those days that a group of prophets from the Jerusalem church come down and one of them, a guy named Agabus, prophesizes that there will be a famine in the Roman Empire and this prophecy leads to action by the congregation.

What we see here is that because of the faithful ministry of several individual Christians the work of God goes forward in and through this church. The grace of God becomes more manifest as more people are transformed by it as Barnabas, Saul and Agabus exercise their gifts in ministry. Every Christian sitting in this room has been given spiritual gifts that we each are to use in order to build the faith of other Christians. We are not all called to do the same things or to be responsible for helping the same people. We each of various limitations upon us. But all of us are called by God to use the gifts God has given to strengthen the faith of other believers. This does not mean that all of us are supposed to have some "official" job or title in the church. Most of the ways we exercise our gifts are in the informal relationships we have with one another. Seeking to encourage the faith of your own family members is as much ministry as leading a small group bible study. We don't need spiritual gift inventories and programs to match your gift with some formal ministry in the church. You will know what your gifts are and who you are to minister to through the process of getting involved in the lives of others. Note also that the effectiveness of our ministry to one another has far more to do with our character and our faith and the presence of the HS than it does with our skill. Who you are in Christ matters far more than what you are able to do. So be a faith filled, Spirit-filled and faithful follower of Christ and seek to love other Christians, starting with your own family and you will manifest the glory of God through exercising the gifts he has given you for the benefit of others.

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IV. Christians care for one another (vv. 23-30)

In many ways the emphasis of Luke in this narrative is the love and unity that exists between these two churches, one primarily Jewish in culture and one primarily Greek in culture. The church in Jerusalem cared for the church in Antioch by sending such a quality teacher in the person of Barnabas and then sending gifted prophets. The church in Antioch, when learning of the approaching famine, which would affect them as much as the church in Jerusalem, organized a relief shipment in advance of the famine for their poor brothers and sisters in Jerusalem. Rather than hoarding their resources for their future need they gave as each one could afford to give to help this Jewish church. The affection of these Christians who had never met one another and who lived such radically different kinds of lifestyles is the most remarkable evidence of the glory of Christ that can be imagined.

Why would people sacrifice their own resources and perhaps even put their own future into jeopardy for people they had never met and who were very different from themselves? The only answer that is possible is because of God's gracious work in their lives. This is what the gospel does to people. No longer is our security in money and the things that money can buy. No longer do we only think of ourselves and our own needs. We have been loved by God and he has promised to care for us and to bring us to heaven when we die. He has been more generous to us than we could have ever hoped in his forgiving us and guaranteeing such an awesome inheritance. So we say with the Psalmist, "You have filled my heart with greater joy than when their grain and new wine abound. I will lie down and sleep in peace for you alone, O Lord, make me dwell in safety." Or we say with the prophet Habakkuk, "Though the fig tree does not bud and there are no grapes on the vines, though the olive crop fails and the fields produce no food, though there are no sheep in the pen or cattle in the stalls, yet I will rejoice in the Lord, I will be joyful in God my Savior. The Sovereign Lord is my strength..." It is out of the security we have in belonging to Christ that we generously seek to love and provide for our brothers and sisters, even those we do not know and who live radically different lives from us culturally.

I can't tell you how encouraged I have been over the past few weeks as I have seen you care for the Fisher family. It has been a great evidence of the love of God and the grace of God to me and others but especially to Fred and Charity and their children. There are many others among us who find themselves in difficult circumstances: deteriorating health and financial crisis and emotional distress and relational difficulty. I trust that as each of us is growing in our knowledge of the amazing grace of God that we are seeking out ways to care for and provide for the weak and hurting among us. Also, as we have on occasion been made aware there are great needs among the churches of God scattered around the world. We need our mission's team to keep us abreast of these needs so we can send people and money and prayer to assist our brothers and sisters. May God increasingly give us such an awareness of his love that we joyfully and generously provide for and care for the family of God both here and around the world and so display his worth and honor.

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