

The Hand of the Lord Was With Them

Acts 11:19-30

Introduction:

1. The church at Jerusalem was composed of Jews from a variety of places (Acts 2:9-11), but it was composed of Jews.
2. But, before His ascension, Jesus had said that the apostles would be His “witnesses both in Jerusalem, and in Judea and Samaria, and even to the remotest part of the earth” (Acts 1:8).
3. The prophets had indicated that the Jews would be an influence for the Lord even to the nations (ex. Isa. 42:6; 49:6).
4. God had always been interested in non-Jews (ex. Jonah’s preaching in Nineveh), but the Jews did not always have such a keen interest in communicating the hope of God to the nations.
5. Jesus seems to have cleared the way for the Gentiles in His “cleansing” of the temple.
6. But the gospel message had been limited to the Jews. God intervened to make the way clear when He sent Peter to the household of Cornelius. God was breaking down the barrier by inviting Greeks into the kingdom. It was not an easy transition to accept, but it was God’s will and their prejudices had to be negotiated.
7. The account that we have just read gives us insight into the initial stages of this circumstance.

Discussion:

- I. They began speaking to the Greeks also (19-20).
 - A. The persecution that centered on Stephen resulted in Christians leaving Jerusalem (Acts 7).
 1. Some went to Phoenicia, Cyprus and Antioch, speaking only to Jews.
 2. But some men of Cyprus and Cyrene came to Antioch and began preaching to the Greeks.
 - B. The fact that Luke is reporting this is indicative of a magnificent change.
 1. He validates their practice when he says, “The hand of the Lord was with them.”
 2. The fact that the Lord was with them is reflected in “a large number of them who believed turned to the Lord.”
 - C. The theological background for this practice is evident in Eph. 2.
 1. Note Paul’s contrast between “you” and “we too” in verses 1-3.
 2. He places both Jews and Gentiles (Greeks) in the same boat as children of wrath. Both are deserving of the same punishment for sin.
 3. Paul indicates that God intervened in this situation in His mercy and because of His love He made us alive with Christ (4-10).
 4. This is consistent with the great commission given by the Lord to go into all the world and make disciples of all the nations (Mk. 16:15-16; Matt. 28:19).
 5. Paul continues his contrast of Jews and Greeks in Eph. 2:11-22, but it is less a matter of contrast and more a matter of bringing them together in one body.
 6. Christ died to bring peace, and unity in one family. It was not that the Greeks

needed to become Jews, but that Jews and Greeks needed to be united together in the household of God. Cultural distinctions were now no longer relevant (Gal. 3:26-29).

7. This was the message of the Lord to Peter in Acts 10:15: "What God has cleansed, no longer consider unholy." Peter concluded: "I most certainly understand now that God is not one to show partiality, but in every nation the man who fears Him and does what is right is welcome to Him" (Acts 10:34-35).

D. There is a lot of polarization in this world.

1. Most obvious to us is the political polarization. Many are very emotional about this polarization. They rise up as adversaries against one another. They dig their heels in and refuse to work together. We should not be surprised by this. This is the way of the world. Malice and envy, hatefulness and enmity is the way of the world. Some of it is between countries. Some of it is within countries in the enmity between opposing political parties. It issues in war, genocide, racial and ethnic cleansings, riots, mob activities, destruction and death.
2. It is also obvious in religious polarization. One religion wants to destroy the other. Sometimes there is confusion between religious and political enmity. But hatred and jealousy rule in the world (James 3:14—18).
3. Even the denominational divisions that exist in this country are inconsistent with what the Lord died to accomplish—peace.

E. These who began preaching to Greeks ran the risk of opposition, hostility and enmity at Jerusalem. We see evidence of problems later on (cf. Acts 15).

II. The church at Jerusalem sent Barnabas to Antioch (22-26).

A. This was a bold move.

1. He could have been sent to reprimand these who were preaching to Greeks.
2. He could have been sent to correct the Greeks and tell them that if they wanted to be a part of the kingdom of God they were going to have to become Jewish proselytes.
3. But there is no evidence that that is what he did, nor is there evidence that this was the Jerusalem church's objective in sending him.

B. Barnabas, witnessing the grace of God, rejoiced and began to encourage them all with a resolute heart to remain true to the Lord (not Jewish tradition; not Jewish law; not to Jewish culture). Loyalty to the Lord was not loyalty to Jewish religion or party affiliation. The grace of God has had a transforming influence (cf. James 3:17ff).

C. Luke makes an observation about Barnabas. "He was a good man, and full of the Holy Spirit and of faith."

1. A bad man, full of the evil spirit and of distrust and suspicion would not have produced the same result.
2. We need more good men, full of the Holy Spirit and of faith.
3. These men witness the grace of God and rejoice and encourage loyalty to the Lord.
4. The result was that considerable numbers were brought to the Lord. Animosity, hatred, and the party spirit are not the keys to effective evangelism.

- D. Barnabas recruited Saul and brought him to Antioch.
 - 1. You may recall that God had specially commissioned Saul to take the gospel to Gentiles (Acts 9:15; 26:17).
 - 2. But you need to know that Saul, before the Lord appeared to him, would not have been a unifying force in the church at Antioch. Instead he would have promoted enmity, hatred and death (Acts 8:3).
 - 3. Now he promoted good relations (Acts 11:26). Hostility, anger, and hatred are not the keys to effective evangelism. They may polarize people and create a following, but it is not a following of the Lord.

III. The Christians in Antioch sent relief to the brethren in Judea (27-30).

- A. Observe the grace of God in their hearts as they work to help their brethren in Judea.
- B. No animosity, no hatred, no condemning judgments, but gracious giving for their benefit. Sounds like peace to me, but more than just a peaceful coexistence of brethren tolerating one another. They are giving to Jews. The spirit of grace is seen in their actions.
- C. Imagine how the receivers of their gifts may have felt. Thankful. Joined together in peace.
- D. But later evidence indicates not everyone in Jerusalem was in favor of Gentiles being accepted (Acts 15). We will have to save that for another time.
- E. Just understand that when the hand of the Lord is with you peace and unity results. When there is another hand involved—hatred, enmity and destruction.

Conclusion:

- 1. These same principles apply in our individual relationships too.
- 2. We need to get this right, brethren, both in our individual relationships and in our relationships in the church.
- 3. We need good people, full of the Holy Spirit and of faith, who when they witness the grace of God they rejoice and encourage loyalty to the Lord!!