

Fully Available to Jesus

Acts 11:19-30

The flow of this passage is very simple. It begins (“Point A”) with no church in Antioch. And it ends (Points B) with a thriving, extraordinary church in Antioch. This was first church described in the book of Acts in which Jews and Gentiles were equals. It was so healthy it would become the apostle Paul’s home/sending church.

So how did the church at Antioch get from Point A to Point B? **First** and foremost, God was at work: “the hand of the Lord” was with them, leading people to Christ; the grace of God was evident; God even sent a prophet with a message for this church. As usual, God was driving the action. But **second**, Jesus worked through his disciples at every turn. And at each stage in the life of this church Jesus utilized his disciples in very specific ways.

One way to describe the disciples in this passage is to say that they were available to Jesus no matter what. They didn’t say, “Jesus, I will seek and serve you IF I feel like it or if it’s convenient” They said, “We are fully available to follow your leading, even if it’s costly.” And so this passage illustrates that **Healthy churches are comprised of disciples who are fully available to Jesus.**

The availability of those described in this passage serves as an example to us. Like them we need to be available to follow the leading of the Holy Spirit, even if it’s costly. This doesn’t mean that we don’t have any boundaries or limitations. If we’re available to God, we still need great discernment and wisdom in knowing what to do because we have a finite amount of time and energy and resources. We mainly need to be available to follow the Spirit’s leading.

Acts 11:19-30 illustrates at least three ways in which we need to be fully available to Jesus.

Fully available in the midst of hardship. (*Acts 11:19-21*) There’s a great temptation to become bitter and self-centered in the midst of hardship. But we see in these verses that the disciples who had been driven out of Jerusalem because of persecution remained loyal to Jesus wherever they went. They continued to walk with him and bear witness of him.

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.

Luke mentioned back in Acts 8:1 that a great persecution broke out in Jerusalem after Stephen was stoned to death. The apostles stayed in Jerusalem but the others were scattered throughout all Judea and Samaria. Here we learn that some traveled to two cities in Syria (Phoenicia and Antioch) and to the island of Cyprus (about 100 miles into the Mediterranean Sea).

I don't really know how I would respond if my family and I were driven out of Manhattan because of my loyalty to Jesus, leaving friends, house, possessions, and work behind. I wonder if I would shake my fist at heaven and say, "Don't you love me? Don't you want my best?" Or would I open my hands in submission and say, "The Lord gives and the Lord takes away. Blessed be the name of the Lord!"

Apparently those who were driven out of Jerusalem did the later. Even though they'd experienced great loss, they still told their fellow Jews about Jesus. Their hardship didn't in any way nullify their loyalty to Jesus and the commitment to being his witnesses near and far.

Luke mentions that they were "speaking the word to no one except Jews." Perhaps, similar to Peter before his vision (Acts 10), they didn't associate with Gentiles; or perhaps they only had opportunity to speak with Jews. Whatever the case, **they spoke about Jesus in the midst of their hardship.**

You can imagine how these conversation went when they arrived in these places. "So, where are you from and what brings you to Antioch? Vacation? Visiting relatives?" "No, actually, we are fellow Jews who came to believe that Jesus of Nazareth is the Messiah. They put him to death, but God raised him up and declared him Lord of all. The authorities are imprisoning and executing many of our brothers and sisters in Christ. When our friend Stephen was brutally stoned to death, we escaped here to Antioch." "Now you have my attention. Please tell me more."

As well, we're told in verses 20 and 21 that "some of them" (i.e., some of those who were driven out of Jerusalem) spoke the gospel to Gentiles as well:

20 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.

The term Hellenists here refers to Greeks, who were Gentiles. Like Peter after his vision (Acts 10), they understood that the message about Jesus was good news for everyone in every nation.

In verse 21 Luke summarizes the response.

21 And the hand of the Lord was with them, and a great number who believed turned to the Lord.

This is what Jesus had promised/declared: You will receive power when the Holy Holy Spirit comes upon you; and you will be my witnesses both near and far. The "hand of the Lord" was the power of the Holy Spirit. Here we see that a great number responded both with faith (they "believed") and with repentance (they "turned to the Lord").

The faithfulness of these disciples who were **available to God in the midst of their hardship** convicts me to the core. They understood that Jesus hadn't promised them an easy life. Rather, he had told his disciples to expect that people would treat them the

way they treated him. But, like Jesus himself, they kept entrusting themselves to God and they followed Jesus anyway.

Honestly, I have had the privilege of seeing how many of you have been fully available to God in the midst of your hardships: You've remained loyal to Jesus even though your lives have been very, very hard. Some of you have persevered through hardships related to health, family, friends, careers. Some of you have been rejected by family and friends because of your faith. Some of you are in the midst of the toughest battle in your life, and you're still available to God.

For the past 30 years, different people from Faith have been involved with our denomination's efforts in the country of Hungary. One person we met there is a disciple of Jesus named Tibi. A few weeks ago several of us got to visit with Tibi when he was here in Manhattan. Tibi has been legally blind as long as we've known him (about 5% sight). But Tibi has had a very fruitful ministry to other blind people; because of his own experience, he can talk about Jesus with great conviction and compassion.

Until 2010 Tibi could see shapes well enough to have a small degree of independence; he could navigate his way around city streets, for example. But in 2010 his eyesight deteriorated and he became completely blind. As a result Tibi went into a deep depression and came close to giving up. But Tibi told us that he began meditating on the verse in Luke where Jesus said, "Do not rejoice that the spirits are subject to you; rejoice that your names are written in heaven" (Luke 10:20). That newfound assurance that his name is written in heaven has given him a new perspective on his suffering in this life. And once again he is now fully available to God even though his hardship is more profound than it's ever been.

Again, I see this same thing happening here at Faith. Many of you are fully available to God in the midst of your hardships. And the church is much, much healthier as a result.

Fully available to help meet the spiritual needs of others. (Acts 11:22-26) In these verses we see that the church at Antioch became established because people like Barnabas and Saul were fully available to help meet the needs of the new believers there.

22 The report of this came to the ears of the church in Jerusalem, and they sent Barnabas to Antioch.

We were introduced to Barnabas in chapter 4. There we were told that in response to the needs of the believers in Jerusalem, he "sold a field. . . and brought the money. . . and laid it at the apostles feet" to be used as they saw fit. Luke also tells us that his name, Barnabas, means "son of encouragement," signifying that he actually was a person who gave courage to others (courage to do the will of God). He surfaces again in chapter 9. There he assured the apostles in Jerusalem that Saul/Paul could indeed be trusted; even though he sought to imprison and execute them, he was now a devoted follower of Christ. Barnabas was one of those rare people who used his influence to give courage to people who needed to do the right thing.

Not surprisingly, when the church in Jerusalem heard that Gentiles had come to Christ in Antioch, they sent Barnabas. If you imitate what is said about Barnabas in this one verse, you will have a profound influence in the lives of people and in the health of this church.

23 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,

First, “he came and saw the grace of God”; he showed up and noticed how good **God** had been to them. Second, “he was glad”; he was filled with joy about what God was doing in their lives. Everybody is glad when God does something in their own life; but it’s extraordinary when somebody is legitimately glad about the grace of God in somebody else’s life. Third, “he exhorted them all to remain faithful to the Lord with steadfast purpose”; he pleaded with them not to give up, but to remain loyal to Jesus.

If you’ve ever experienced this, you will never forget it. If somebody shows up and notices what God is doing in your life . . . and is glad for you . . . and looks you in the eye and says, “You have got to remain faithful to Jesus; he is worthy of your entire life. . .” you will never forget it. ***If you imitate this***, you will have a profound influence in the lives of many.

Why did Barnabas respond this way to the believers in Antioch?

24 for he was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and of faith. And a great many people were added to the Lord.

Because so many people had come to Christ, we read in verses 25 and 26:

25 So Barnabas went to Tarsus to look for Saul, 26 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.

It had been about eleven years since Saul had come to Christ in Damascus (Acts 9, Galatians 1:11-2:10). Even though Acts doesn’t record what Saul did during those years, we know from his letters that he had not been idle. He had been seeking and serving God. When Barnabas told him about the need in Antioch, he came. Like Barnabas, he was available to help meet the spiritual needs of the new believers in Antioch. And “for a whole year they met with the church and taught a great many people.” Their influence involved spiritual relationship (“they met with the church”) and spiritual content (they “taught a great many people”). They used their God-given gifts in the context of relationship.

So many of you are doing this presently and have done this throughout the history of Faith. This church has the degree of health that it does because you have been ***fully available to God to help meet the spiritual needs of others*** in our midst. Many of

you pour out your lives for the spiritual benefit of others - through both the formal ministries of Faith and through the way you live your lives day-in and day-out.

The last sentence in verse 26 isn't a throw-away line. When the inhabitants of Antioch thought of these disciples, guess what came into their minds? Where were they known for? It turns out they were known for their devotion to Christ! "And in Antioch the disciples were first called Christians." They took the word Christ and added a suffix. These disciples were so focused on Christ that they were given the nickname Christ-ones or "Christ people." [Disciples of Jesus didn't refer to themselves as Christians until the second century (Fernando, p. 350).]

In the 1970s something similar happened; the term "Jesus freak" was a derogatory nickname given to Christians who were vocal about their faith. Just as the church eventually began calling themselves Christians, some believers embraced the nickname Jesus freak for themselves (e.g., DC Talk). They were like, "Exactly. We're definitely stuck on Jesus."

The point is that this church in Antioch was Christ-centered. In contrast with a group of believers in Jerusalem known as "the party of the circumcision" (see 11:2), they were simply known as **Christ people**. Oh God, may that be true of us as well. It's possible for a church to be remembered for a dozen different things. But **may our loyalty to Jesus be the thing that stands out the most** when people think of us.

Third, verses 27-30 speak of being:

Fully available to help meet the material needs of others. (Acts 11:27-30) In these verses we see that this infant church in Antioch even held their money with an open hand. Yet again, we see how God is driving the action, this time through a prophet with a message.

27 Now in these days prophets came down from Jerusalem to Antioch. 28 And one of them named Agabus 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).

Prophets in the New Testament don't correspond to prophets in the Old Testament. If anything, the apostles correspond with OT prophets in the sense that they spoke an authoritative, infallible word from God that wasn't to be questioned. By contrast, those with the gift of prophecy in the New Testament were to submit their prophecies to others to be evaluated (1 Thess. 5:20, 1 Cor. 14:29); that never would have been the case with Isaiah or Jeremiah or Ezekiel. In the New Testament no gifts are infallible, including prophecy. We get it wrong sometimes.

Having said all of that, prophecy is not to be despised (1 Thess 5:20). So when Agabus, a prophet from Jerusalem, stood up and foretold that there would be a great famine all over the world, the church at Antioch responded this way:

29 So the disciples determined, every one according to his ability, to send relief to the brothers living in Judea.

As is the pattern elsewhere, their giving was voluntary (they **decided** to give; see 2 Corinthians 9:7) and proportional (according to their ability/prosperity; see 1 Corinthians 16:2). Here we have a church of both Jews and Gentiles that decides to help meet the financial needs of the Jewish church in Jerusalem. This is one more evidence of their growing maturity.

By far the most extensive teaching we have in the New Testament on giving involves Paul encouraging predominantly Gentile churches to send relief aid to the church at Jerusalem. Years later, in Romans 15:25-29 Paul reasoned that since the Jews had blessed the Gentiles spiritually by supplying a Savior, the Gentiles should reciprocate and bless the Jewish church materially in their time of need. (See also Galatians 2:10, 2 Corinthians 8-9, and 1 Corinthians 16:1-4.)

30 And they did so, sending it to the elders by the hand of Barnabas and Saul.

The church in Antioch was fully available to help meet the material needs of others. They understood the concept of stewardship. In an absolute sense, they weren't the owners of what they had. Rather, God still owned everything, but he had entrusted some of his resources to them for a short period of time. And so when God, through Agabus the prophet and through the Spirit prompted them to give some of HIS resources to the church at Jerusalem, they said, "Of course." That's what it looks like to be **fully available to help meet the material needs of others**.

Over the years and presently, I have seen this same mindset in so many of you. You don't ask the question, "What's the minimum amount I have to give to feel good about myself?" Rather, you prayerfully consider the amount **God** wants you to give. Your giving has helped meet the material needs of many, many people and has built into the health of this church. Thank you.

In closing I want to say to you something similar to what Paul wrote to the Thessalonian church in 1 Thessalonians 4:10. Paul mentions that he really didn't need to write and tell them, "Love one another" because they were already doing that very, very well. So he commended them for their love and said, "But I urge you, **excel still more**." He didn't want them to plateau and become complacent. In a similar way, I commend you as a church for being fully available to God in the midst of hardship, fully available to God to help meet spiritual and material needs. Your availability is essential for the health of this church. At the same time, I urge you to **excel still more**.