

September 12, 2021 by Steve Brandon



Antioch: A Giving Church

Acts 11:27-30

1. Prophecy (verses 27-28)

2. Relief (verses 29-30)

As I reflect upon my ministry at Rock Valley Bible church, of anything that I have sought to do as a pastor, it to push and encourage all of you to be a giving people.

Now, when I talk about "a giving people," I'm not talking about simply giving your dollars to Rock Valley Bible Church, but giving of yourself to others. serving others. Certainly, that's reflected in your financial giving. But, over the years, I haven't pushed you to give to Rock Valley Bible Church, per say. I have encouraged you to give. If that's to the church! That's great. If that's to personal missionaries that you support! That's great. If that's to orphans in foreign lands! That's great! If it's cash in hand to your hurting neighbor! That's great as well.

Further, I have encouraged you to be givers, of your time and talents. When someone has a need, and you have a talent, share your talent and time. Give of your time in service to others.

As a church, we have sought to model this. Currently, more than 20% of all that is given to Rock Valley Bible Church is given away to missions, both globally and locally. And you my heart to increase that to 50%! We who live in the wealthiest nation that the world has ever known, ought to be people who are equally as generous.

And we have sacrificed some comforts at our church, because we have given to others outside our church. We have chosen to save 10% our budget for future needs in our "growth fund." We have done some remodeling at church, But we have done so slowly as the funds have come in. We have a parking lot that needs resurfacing. It's like a parking lot of many speed-bumps. One man in our congregation calls them "moguls." To date, we haven't done it, because we have given much of our budget to missions. But we are on path to do it. We have received some quotes to get it done. And we are aiming to do that at some point. My guess is next year. With the rest of our budget, we have tried to live below our means.

Regarding our finances, we try to be transparent as possible. Currently, we give 21% to missions, 10% to future growth of the church, 1% to adoption, and 68% to our operating expenses. Further, we don't try to spend every dollar that comes into the church.

What we have done as a church has been intentional. My hope is that each of you have finances that look something like this. You give away a good portion of your income, whatever you can afford. You save for a future day. And you live below your means.

These three words can help to guide you in your finances: Give, Save, Live. Give first. Save second. Live on the rest. I have encouraged you to live this way, because, this is for your good! Jesus said, "It is more blessed to give than to receive" (Acts 20:35).

Well, as we come to our text this morning, we are going to see "A Giving Church." We are going to see the church in Antioch be generous to give of their resources to help those in distress. Appropriately, my message this morning is entitled, "Antioch: A Giving Church."

Now, last week, we looked at this church in Antioch and saw how great it was. In fact, that was the title of my message last week: "Antioch: A Great Church."

So, before we read our text this morning, let's review where we were last week. Because, my message this morning is really an extension of my message from last week. It's like it's a "Part 2." The fact that Antioch was a giving church is really one more point to show how Antioch was a great church.

If you remember, the church at Antioch was great because it had

1. Many Witnesses (verses 19-20)

We saw this last week in verse 19.

Acts 11:19

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.

The key places in verse 19 are Jerusalem and Antioch. Jerusalem is where Stephen was martyred. Antioch will be the focus of the last half of chapter 11. ^[1] If you look at a Bible map, you can see Jerusalem there in the south, and Antioch, way up north. As the crow flies, they are about 500 kilometers from each other. That's about 300 miles. By standards in the ancient world, it's a long ways. If you wanted to travel straight from one place to another, It would take you a couple of weeks to travel there by foot in a week or two.

The people mentioned in verse 19 are those who were scattered as a result “of the persecution that arose over Stephen.” These people scattered “as far as Phoenicia and Cyprus and Antioch.” Phoenicia is a region far north of Jerusalem. Cyprus is an island in the Mediterranean Sea. Antioch becomes the focus of our text.

Now, we see in verse 19 that as these people went, they were “speaking the word to no one except Jews” (verse 19). Last week, I emphasized that those who were speaking were not the apostles. The apostles remained in Jerusalem. Those speaking were the common folk of the church. This was a strength of the church in Antioch, that many people of the church were “speaking the word [of God] to others.” This will be our greatness as well, if we but open our mouths and speak with others about Jesus.

In verse 20, we read ...

Acts 11:20

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.

I called these men, ...

2. Daring Witnesses (verse 20)

... because they did a bold and daring thing: they spoke the gospel to the Greeks! It took a vision from God to convince Peter to do this. It simply took the gospel to its' conclusion: God's grace is for all, even the Greeks.

But you see these men coming from “Cyprus and Cyrene.” Cyprus is the island, mentioned in verse 19. Cyrene is from a long ways away. It is on the northern tip of Africa, southwest of the island of Crete. All coming Antioch, “Preaching the Lord Jesus.”

Great things were happening in Antioch. We read in verse 21,

Acts 11:21

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

This was ...

3. God's Hand (verse 21)

God gives repentance. And he gave repentance to many in Antioch, as many of them turned to the Lord! And we shall see in the book of Acts, God's hand is going to be on this church in Antioch! It will become the central place from which the missionary movement to the world would begin!

We read about the first prayed-for and planned missionary journey ever taken by the church. Paul and Barnabas were sent out. they traveled west to the island of Cyprus, (where Barnabas was from). Then they traveled across the entire island, and took to sea again to head up to the region of Pamphylia. then, they went up to Antioch in Psidia, traveling back east through Iconium, Lystra, and Derbe. then, they returned home to Antioch!

This missionary journey began and ended with the hand of God. It began in Acts 13 with the Holy Spirit commanding the leaders of the church to Acts 13:3 “Set apart for me Barnabas and [Paul] for the work to which I have called them.” When they returned back to Antioch to report all that happened, “they declared all that God had done with them, and how he had opened a door of faith to the Gentiles” (Acts 14:27). This was God's hand on the church in Antioch.

God's hand was upon them for the second missionary journey as well. They began their journey and ended their journey out of this great church in Antioch. Paul and Silas went north, through Cilicia, visiting the regions where they had gone before (places like Lystra and Iconium). Then, they received a divine revelation, which guided them into Macedonia and Achaia. They spent a year and half in Corinth (Acts 18:11). They visited Ephesus and Caesarea and Jerusalem, before finally returning again to Antioch (Acts 18:22).

And the Lord was with them the entire time, guiding them where they should go with visions (Acts 16:9). opening the hearts of people like Lydia in Philippi (Acts 16:14). protecting Paul in Corinth, because God had many people in Corinth who would come to faith in Jesus (Acts 18:9). And it all began and ended in Antioch!

According to Acts 18:23, Paul spent “some time” in Antioch. And then, he departed on his third missionary journey. It was a journey that would take him more than three years. A journey that would not lead him back to Antioch, because, he was arrested in the temple in Jerusalem. He never had an opportunity to return back to his sending church. Rather, he was taken from Jerusalem to Rome as a prisoner, to stand trial before Caesar.

It's only then that this mighty church in Antioch fades into history. But God's hand was with this church in Antioch. and the Lord did great things through this church. And it was a great church.

But it's not that the church in Antioch was strong because of themselves. Remember, they had ...

4. Outside Support (verse 22)

The church in Jerusalem sent Barnabas to help them.

Acts 11:22

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

Barnabas was the perfect guy for the church, as he was one of the ...

5. Humble Builders (verses 23-24)

He came with encouragement and faith and humility.

Acts 11:23-24

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.

The humility of Barnabas was on full display in verse 25, when he went to Tarsus to get Saul and bring him back to Antioch.

Acts 11:25

So Barnabas went to Tarsus to look for Saul,

Tarsus is about 70-80 miles around the Mediterranean Sea. Barnabas was more than willing to bring others into the church, more gifted than himself to build the church in Antioch. The ministry was not "his." It was "the Lord's" And so, the church in Antioch thrived with ...

6. Gifted Teachers (verses 25-26)

Acts 11:26

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.

Paul and Barnabas. What a team! These are the very two men that God used to make Antioch such a great church. After a year in Antioch, teaching and equipping the believers in the church, Paul and Barnabas are sent out to impact the world for Christ! (See Acts 13:1-3).

I'm greatly looking forward to working through the rest of the book of Acts, to watch how God uses this church. To spread the gospel! To spread the message of Jesus. Here are some words we will encounter. Paul told those in the synagogue in Psidian Antioch, "Let it be known to you therefore, brothers, that through this man forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you" (Acts 13:38). Paul said in Lystra, "We bring you good news, that you should turn from these vain things to a living God, who made the heaven and the earth and the sea and all that is in them" (Acts 14:15). Paul said to the Philippian jailer, "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household" (Acts 16:31). Paul explained and proved to those in Thessalonica "that it was necessary for the Christ to suffer and to rise from the dead, and saying, "This Jesus, whom I proclaim to you, is the Christ" (Acts 17:3). Paul said to the men in Athens, "The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent, because he has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed; and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead" (Acts 17:30-31).

Such rich words await us in the book of Acts. May we believe them! May we be bold to proclaim them to those around us.

Finally, last week, we saw in verse 26, ...

Acts 11:26

And in Antioch the disciples were first called Christians.

As I explained last week, this was not a name that the disciples came up with. It was a name that the outsiders called those in Antioch. It was probably not such a kind term. The equivalent for us to day is ...

7. Jesus Freaks (verse 26b)

This is what the world often calls those who are on fire for Christ. It's a derogatory term. but one that we will gladly take to ourselves. If Rock Valley Bible Church is going to be great like the church in Antioch, we need to be Jesus Freaks.

But there's one more characteristic of the church in Antioch that we didn't look at last week. It's an eight quality of the church. I'm calling it, ...

8. Giving Hearts (verses 27-30)

And now, we are prepared to read our text.

Acts 11:27-30

Now in these days prophets came down from Jerusalem to Antioch. 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). So the disciples determined, every one 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.

The title of my message this morning is, "Antioch: A Giving Church." My first point comes in verses 27-28.

1. Prophecy (verses 27-28)

These verses record the prophecy that came from the mouth of Agabus. He came down from Jerusalem, just like Barnabas did. to give further aid to help the church. But he wasn't the only one. Note that verse 27 tells us of other prophets (plural) who came down.

Acts 11:27

Now in these days prophets came down from Jerusalem to Antioch.

In the early days of the church, prophets played a crucial role in guiding the church, because, there was no New Testament. There was no book of Acts, to inspire us in God's working through the churches to reach the world, because history was being written at the time. There was no Romans. There was no 1 or 2 Corinthians. There was no Galatians or Ephesians or Philippians or Colossians. There was no 1 or 2 Thessalonians. There were no pastoral epistles written to Timothy or Titus. There was no letter to Philemon. These didn't exist, because Paul hadn't written them yet. Hebrews and James weren't written and distributed until later. Peter wrote his letters to the people who were scattered throughout the region that Paul evangelized on his missionary journeys. And John's epistles (and Revelation) were written much later. So, the church didn't have a Bible to use as their authoritative guide like we do. Now, they did have some portions of the gospel accounts. Further, they had some eye-witnesses of the life of Jesus. But these men were in Jerusalem.

So, in those early days of the church, God used prophets to guide the church in how it should function. And these men were crucial in building the church. Paul would later say that the church is "built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone" (Ephesians 2:20). In other words, Paul saw a picture of a tall building with the the apostles and prophets at the side of the foundation. Christ Jesus, himself, being the most prominent stone. Every Christian is built up that foundation! And we, today are continuing to be built up in such a way.

The church is like a tall building, with a carefully laid foundation. upon which generations upon generations are built. Every believer, in some way can trace their believing heritage back to these apostles and prophets.

But just like there we have no apostles today, who have been personally sent out by Jesus Christ, Neither do I believe that there are prophets today. Oh, they served a purpose in the early church. to guide it and direct it in days before the Scriptures existed. But there is no purpose for them today. We have God's Word to guide us, we don't need prophets to instruct us on our way.

Now, in verse 28, we see one of the prophets identified. His name is Agabus. He will come up again in Acts 21, as he prophesies what will happen to the apostle Paul as he enters Jerusalem. He will be bound hand and foot (Acts 21:11). And that's exactly what happened. This is a sign of a true prophet. When future events are predicted with 100% accuracy.

Moses said, "When a prophet speaks in the name of the Lord, if the word does not come to pass or come true, that is a word that the Lord has not spoken; the prophet has spoken it presumptuously. You need not be afraid of him" (Deuteronomy 18:22). In fact, Moses said that such a "prophet" should die. "But the prophet who presumes to speak a word in my name that I have not commanded him to speak, or who speaks in the name of other gods, that same prophet shall die" (Deuteronomy 18:20). Such a standard is hardly kept by self-proclaimed "prophets" today.

The prophecy here in our text (in verse 28) is simple:

Acts 11:28

And one of them named Agabus stood up and foretold by the Spirit that there would be a great famine over all the world.

And then, Luke, the author of the book of Acts, is quick to affirm that ...

Acts 11:28

(this took place in the days of Claudius).

In other words, Agabus was a true prophet, because what he said came to pass. There was a famine in the days of Claudius.

But not only confirmed here by Luke, but if you would read Josephus, a Jewish historian of the day, he too would affirm that there was a famine in the Roman Empire during this time. Josephus, a Jewish historian in the days of the New Testament, wrote:

A little before the beginning of this war, when Claudius was emperor of the Romans, and Ismael was our high priest, [a] great famine was come upon us. Josephus goes on to describe how rare and expensive the food was. And how the priests, during the feast of unleavened bread, when you eat the bread, These priests, could not eat the bread. For, he said, "Not one of the priests was so hardy as to eat one crumb of [the bread]." ^[2]

All of this helps to date the book of Acts. Claudius reigned for 13 years (from A.D. 41-54). Josephus dates the famine to A. D. 45. This helps to put perspective on the book of Acts. In our working through the book of Acts, we are some 10-15 years after the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus. It took this long for the gospel to reach beyond Jerusalem to Antioch.

On another occasion, Josephus spoke of how Helena, the king's mother, a Jewish proselyte, sought to provide help for the famine in Jerusalem. Josephus writes the following:

Her coming was of very great advantage to the people of Jerusalem; for whereas a famine did oppress them at that time, and many people died for want of what was necessary to procure food withal, queen Helena sent some of her servants to Alexandria with money to buy a great quantity of corn, and others of them to Cyprus, to bring a cargo of dried figs. And as soon as they were come back, and had brought those provisions, which was done very quickly, she distributed food to those that were in want of it, and left a most excellent memorial behind her of this benefaction, which she bestowed on our whole nation. ^[3]

The king's mother brought humanitarian need to those in Jerusalem. This is exactly what the church in Antioch pledged to do. They pledged

humanitarian need. This is exactly Luke's point. As John Stott says in his commentary, "Luke's concern, however, is not so much with the fulfillment of Agabus' prophecy as with the generous response of Antioch's church."^[4]

And this is what we see in verses 29 and 30. We see the "generous response." I'm calling it ...

2. Relief (verses 29-30)

Acts 11:29-30

So the disciples determined, every one 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.

I love how quickly they respond to the need! A straight-forward reading of the text seems to indicate that these disciples in Antioch determined to send relief to those in Jerusalem, even before there was a famine. The prophesy of Agabus was enough for them to respond, even before the famine reared its ugly head.

The reason for their generosity is really quite simple. Those in Antioch were indebted to those in Jerusalem.

Do you remember where the spread of the gospel began? It all began in Jerusalem. with the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus. Jews began to believe in Jesus. With the persecution that came upon those who believed in the Messiah, the church was scattered. Soon, the gospel reached Antioch. It all began in Jerusalem.

Further, Jerusalem demonstrated their heart of support for the church in Antioch. When the church in Jerusalem saw the need for help in Antioch, they sent one of their best to help, Barnabas. Not only that, but Agabus also came. Where did Agabus come from? He came from Jerusalem (Acts 11:27). Agabus wasn't the only one! There were other prophets who came! It seemed as if there was a steady stream of people coming to help the church in Antioch.

Wasn't it only fitting, then, that the church in Antioch to have a heart for those in Jerusalem under distress? to send Paul and Barnabas back with some relief funds? The principle is clearly stated in Romans 15:27, "If the Gentiles have come to share in their spiritual blessings, they are also to be of service to them in material blessings." The Gentiles in Antioch had been the recipients of great spiritual blessings from those in Jerusalem. It is only right for those in Antioch to turn around and give to help meet the physical needs of those in Jerusalem.

I see this all the time. When people are impacted and helped spiritually, their natural heart's inclination is to respond to help physically. When people come to know the Lord through some church, or through some teaching ministry on the radio or internet, there is a natural response to give to support the ministry. "I have been helped by this ministry. I know that others will be as well. I want to support them in whatever way that I can." And people are generous. That's what we see here. We see those in Antioch being generous toward those in Jerusalem.

I love how Luke describes how this worked.

Acts 11:29

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

That is, some gave more. Some gave less. Those with more gave more. Those with less gave less. As you have ability, and as you have a desire, give. Paul says much the same thing in the following passage:

2 Corinthians 9:6-8

The point is this: whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows bountifully will also reap bountifully. Each one must give as he has decided in his heart, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. And God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that having all sufficiency in all things at all times, you may abound in every good work

Now, you may have heard this verse many times talking about how you need to give to the church. You must give! Decide in your heart what you will give. And give it to the church. The only problem with this is the Paul isn't asking for funds for the church. He isn't asking for finances for himself. He's asking for those in Corinth to give to missions!

Paul is asking the church in Corinth to give to help the poor and needy in Jerusalem. What takes place here in Acts 11 will be repeated, as those in Jerusalem were facing some hard times. Jerusalem was facing hardship because of the famine in chapter 11. But later, because of the hardships that faced those who trusted in Jesus as the Messiah in a Jewish culture, they would face hardships as well. Those who believed in Jesus had little help from the priests or from the temple guard. The Christians in Jerusalem were viewed as traitors. So, any help that they might receive must come from the outside.

So, Paul rallied the churches in Macedonia to give to those in need in Jerusalem. Listen to what he said concerning the generosity of those in Macedonia:

2 Corinthians 8:1-4

We want you to know, brothers, about the grace of God that has been given among the churches of Macedonia, for in a severe test of affliction, their abundance of joy and their extreme poverty have overflowed in a wealth of generosity on their part. For they gave according to their means, as I can testify, and beyond their means, of their own accord, begging us earnestly for the favor of taking part in the relief of the saints [in Jerusalem].

Their heart was huge for the believers in Jerusalem. Because, they owed it to them! The gospel came to them from Jerusalem! What else could they do, but help those in Jerusalem at their time of need! The exhortation to those in Corinth was the same. "But as you excel in

everything—in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in all earnestness, and in our love for you—see that you excel in this act of grace also" (2 Corinthians 8:7). Paul, then gives a clear motive: "I say this not as a command, but to prove by the earnestness of others that your love also is genuine. For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you by his poverty might become rich" (2 Corinthians 8:8-9).

The exhortation to us is the same: We are called to be givers, because Jesus gave of himself to us! Christianity is a giving religion! We follow our leader, Jesus, who gave himself for us.

And as I think about Rock Valley Bible Church, I so long for us to be givers!

This sermon was delivered to Rock Valley Bible Church on September 12, 2021 by Steve Brandon.

For more information see www.rockvalleybiblechurch.org.

[1] Throughout this message, I used maps from <https://www.thebiblejourney.org>, which I displayed on the screen behind me as I preached.

[2] Antiquities 3.15.3. If you are unfamiliar with this work, you can read it here: <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/2848/2848-h/2848-h.htm>.

[3] Antiquities 20.2.5. See also Antiquities 20.5.2.

[4] John Stott, *The Message of Acts* (Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 1990), 205-206.