

## Acts 11:19-26

<sup>19</sup>Now those who had been scattered by the persecution that took place at the time of Stephen traveled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus, and Antioch, speaking the word to no one except Jews. <sup>20</sup>But there were some men from Cyprus and Cyrene who came to Antioch and also began to speak to the Greeks, preaching the good news about the Lord Jesus. <sup>21</sup>The Lord's hand was with them, and a large number of people believed and turned to the Lord.

<sup>22</sup>A report about this reached the ears of the church in Jerusalem, and they sent Barnabas to go on to Antioch. <sup>23</sup>When he arrived and saw God's grace, he was glad and encouraged them all to remain true to the Lord with devoted hearts. <sup>24</sup>He was a good man who was full of the Holy Spirit and faith, and a large number of people were added to the Lord.

<sup>25</sup>Then Barnabas went to Tarsus to look for Saul. <sup>26</sup>When he found him, he brought him to Antioch. So for a whole year they met with the church and taught a large number of people. It was in Antioch that the disciples were first called Christians.

## They Were Called Christians

### I.

They fled. Whether its because of a group's ethnicity or religious beliefs or for social or political reasons, persecution often triggers movement. Some are not able to leave for a variety of reasons. Some don't *want* to leave and they try stick it out, only to form the next wave later.

Those who fled took little more than the clothes on their backs. There just *had* to be some place that would let them live in relative peace and happiness and make a living for themselves. Beyond that, they just wanted to worship as they chose.

There were some loosely organized groups who fled together. Others fled as small family units, but they found themselves quickly gravitating toward some of the other little groups. It was only natural that they would do so. When you find yourself in a new country with a new language you tend to seek out people who can understand your cultural and ethnic idiosyncracies—and your religious beliefs.

What I have just described is some of my family history.

Ancestors on both sides of my family are Germans who had been living in the Black Sea area of Russia and came to North America. My father's side immigrated to Dakota Territory in the 1870's. My mom's side fled to Canada after being persecuted by the Russian Communists around the time of Word War I.

Many Lutheran churches began because of German immigrants. My mom's uncle wrote a book filled with information about Germans coming from the Black Sea. He left Russia before the problems of Communism to get seminary training in Germany, then was called to the United States to be a pastor to serve Lutherans who had preceded him. My grandfather on my father's side was born in 1886 before South Dakota became a state. He became a Lutheran pastor to serve his generation of German Lutherans.

### II.

The book of Acts records the same sort of thing hundreds of years earlier. "Now those who had been scattered by the persecution that took place at the time of Stephen..." (Acts

11:19, EHV). The name “Stephen” might ring a bell. He is called the first Christian martyr. Earlier the book of Acts records his death at the hands of Jewish zealots who were trying to stamp out what they saw as a perversion of their religious heritage.

“Now those who had been scattered by the persecution that took place at the time of Stephen traveled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus, and Antioch, speaking the word to no one except Jews” (Acts 11:19, EHV). Scattered bands of Jewish Christians found themselves frequently interacting with other ethnic Jews in these new and foreign lands. It was a natural. These other Jews had similar customs and manners of speech. Why wouldn’t you congregate with them?

Those interactions led naturally to sharing their Christian faith. The Messiah these ethnic Jews had been waiting for had come. They hadn’t heard about him, yet. Since they were not in the seat of Judaism in Jerusalem, there was not the fierce opposition from the religious establishment, so the news about Jesus began to spread.

“But there were some men from Cyprus and Cyrene who came to Antioch and also began to speak to the Greeks, preaching the good news about the Lord Jesus” (Acts 11:20, EHV). Even before the time of Jesus there had been people from other nationalities who became converts to Judaism. They were called “proselytes.” They were believers, but they could never experience Judaism the way those who were Jewish ethnically could do. They were not allowed in to the inner parts of the temple. There were just certain religious rites they were excluded from.

The Psalm for today foretold that someday things would be different. “The LORD has made his salvation known. He has revealed his righteousness to the eyes of the nations. <sup>3</sup>... All the ends of the earth have seen the salvation of our God” (Psalm 98:2-3, EHV).

Some of those ethnic Jews who had come to know Jesus were making friends among the natives of their new home. It was only natural. It was also only natural that they began to share their faith in Jesus. The salvation planned by God the Father and carried out by Jesus was being revealed to the nations, just as the Psalmist had said.

“The Lord’s hand was with them, and a large number of people believed and turned to the Lord” (Acts 11:21, EHV).

The Bible tells us that God works all kinds of things for the good of believers, even things that seem to be very, very bad to us. Persecution did not seem to be good to these Jewish Christians, yet because of it they went to new lands and made new friends. Because of it the message of the gospel was spread to people who wouldn’t otherwise have heard it. God had a plan. The Lord’s hand was with them all the while. Many people came to faith in Jesus because there had been persecution in and around Jerusalem a few years earlier.

It all happened organically—without any formal plan on the part of the Christians fleeing persecution—but it was all part of God’s plan.

### III.

Believers need pastors. “A report about this reached the ears of the church in Jerusalem, and they sent Barnabas to go on to Antioch” (Acts 11:22, EHV). In spite of the ongoing persecution of Jews who followed Jesus, the Apostles and other early Christians around Jerusalem had been busy training pastors.

It is great news to hear that believers have gathered together to worship as best they can. Even better is the news that they have been sharing their faith with others and bringing even more to know about Christ. Those who had scattered to the four corners of the known world would need to continue to learn and grow in their faith. Barnabas was sent to be their

pastor.

“When he arrived and saw God’s grace, he was glad and encouraged them all to remain true to the Lord with devoted hearts. <sup>24</sup>He was a good man who was full of the Holy Spirit and faith, and a large number of people were added to the Lord” (Acts 11:23-24, EHV). Barnabas was a good pastor. He was a man who was faithful to the Word of God and taught it to many. God blessed his work and the church there in Antioch grew some more.

“Then Barnabas went to Tarsus to look for Saul. <sup>26</sup>When he found him, he brought him to Antioch. So for a whole year they met with the church and taught a large number of people” (Acts 11:25-26, EHV). Do you see the irony? If you remember your Bible history, you know that Saul was the one who was watching the cloaks of those executing Stephen by throwing rocks at him (Acts 6:58). The first verse of our text referenced the time of Stephen as the time of the persecution that had driven these people from their homeland to seek asylum.

After watching Stephen die, Saul had become one of the persecutors. No doubt even *more* people fled because of *him*. But Saul saw Jesus on the road to Damascus and had been called by him to be a believer. He spent some additional years learning more about the Christian faith. Now he came to Antioch to be one of the pastors that would teach people who fled persecution the same gospel he had once persecuted.

The Lord moves in mysterious ways.

The little church looked less and less Jewish and more and more diverse. People started recognizing it. “It was in Antioch that the disciples were first called Christians” (Acts 11:26, EHV). They weren’t Jewish Christians and Greek Christians and other Christians, they were just Christians. People are just people. No matter what ethnic background they were, these people were uniting around something more profound and more important—they were uniting around Christ. That got them the nickname “Christians.” It stuck.

#### IV.

History marches on. The Black Sea Germans and other Lutherans came by the score to North America. At first, perhaps, Germans gathered together in Lutheran churches because it was familiar and they could find like-minded people.

There are probably quite a few people of some German descent in our congregation, but not all. We’re not “German Christians,” just Christians. We *do* call ourselves *Lutheran* Christians, but that is because of confessional teachings that hold fast to what the Bible teaches, not any particular ethnicity.

We don’t look to seminaries in far-flung countries for our pastors and teachers, but our own worker-training schools in Saginaw and Watertown and New Ulm and Mequon. Congregations continue to call qualified pastors and teachers to help them continue to bring this all-important message of the gospel to still more souls—souls who have gathered in this country from every nation on earth.

People still need to know the same thing—they need to know that Jesus is their Savior. We continue to mix and mingle with our neighbors so that more might be brought to know him. We love being called Christians, and we want more to be called Christians, too.

God grant that we do the same thing in our Christian lives as those early Christians who found themselves seeking asylum in Antioch. Gather together around the Word of God and reach out to your friends and neighbors with the gospel. May the Lord’s hand continue to be with us as it was with them. Amen.