

“LOOK WHAT’S HAPPENING IN ANTIOCH”
Psalm 67:1-7, Romans 3:21-26, Acts 11:19-30
October 19 & 20, 2024

Last week Saturday, I was involved in the Feed My Starving Children manna pack event in Sheboygan Falls. It was there that we were told that a person dies every 4 seconds because of starvation. 1 - 2 - 3 - 4. There. Another person just died of starvation. And another...and another. It astounded me that so many people die from the lack of food in a world where there is so much abundance and affluence. It amazed me that though we have resources all around us, millions of people die because they don’t have enough food. Our 1 ½ hour shift filling bags with rice, soy protein, vegetables and vitamins was enough to feed 85 children one meal a day for a whole year. It is marvelous what we can do to change the life of another if we are willing to give of ourselves to do the work of the Lord.

But **do you know** that many more millions of people die from a different kind of starvation in our world today? They die from spiritual starvation, most often self-inflicted. They do not know about the love of God for them, so they slowly waste away, starving their souls to death because they do not, or cannot, or will not, feed themselves on the life-giving Word given to us through Jesus Christ.

Ken Taylor, of New Orleans, Louisiana, says, “A friend of mine serves as a missionary in a restricted access country. For many years the government of this country has taught the people that there is no God. My friend had the opportunity to interact on a regular basis with a nonbeliever of that country who is a highly educated professional.

“After developing a friendship with the professional, my friend had the opportunity to share the gospel message with him. My friend was taken aback by the man's response: ‘What you have told me cannot be true. If it were true, it is such good news that someone would have

told this to me before.”¹ It’s not that it isn’t true; it’s that he was not allowed to hear it.

You see, there are many who desire to keep the Word of God in the Bible out of the lives of the people they govern, because if by chance they come to know Jesus as the Christ, their hearts would be changed, their lives would become spiritually filled, and there would be no more control over those persons because Jesus would now be their King. Once a person receives Jesus Christ as their Savior and Lord, they are able to find life and hope and joy and love. And as they grow in their relationship with Jesus, they find the starvation of their souls relieved, and they are filled with God’s Holy Spirit.

Psalms 67 proclaims this. It is a prayer asking God to make Himself known to the whole world so that His Salvation could be achieved in every nation (1-2). As the nations come to know the Lord, God pours out His blessings on them and brings them hope for physical and spiritual life and there is joy in their hearts (3-5). As the people come to know the Savior, Jesus Christ, they find that He provides an abundance of life, here in this world and even beyond this life (6-7). Such Good News!

And Romans 3 informs us that the righteousness of God “*is given through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe*” in Him. Paul tells us, “*There is no difference between Jew and Gentile, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, **and all** are justified freely by His grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus*” (3:22-24). Everyone in the whole world can find freedom from starvation of the soul as they claim Jesus Christ as their Savior.

That’s the confidence the early believers had as they left Jerusalem after the persecutions broke out following Stephen’s martyrdom. Listen to the next account in the Book of Acts. This is chapter 11:19-30. (READ Acts 11:19-30)

¹ (PreachingToday.com, *Perfect Illustrations*, [Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 2000], pg.111)

Wherever they went, the new believers took the great Good News of Jesus with them, sharing that news with those around them. It was so good that they couldn't keep it to themselves. Just like the news of the arrival of a new baby, or the success of your favorite ball team, or your recounting the events of a recent vacation - we can't help but share it with another because we are so excited about it. When the Good News of Jesus fills our souls, and it flows into our whole lives, we become so excited about it that we are eager to share what Jesus has done in our lives with all those around us.

So for those dispersed due to the persecution of anyone who claimed Jesus Christ as their Savior, they took Jesus with them everywhere they went. It may have been one woman talking to her neighbor as she hung out the wash. It could have been another telling how Jesus changed his life to the guy next to him at the fish market. It could have been sharing the goodness of what the Lord had done with a fellow traveler. Prayers could have been made to one another in their need. Hospitality toward those who were lacking basic resources would have peaked the interest of some to ask why they were doing what they were doing. The believers in Jesus shared their faith in Jesus with those around them in a variety of ways everywhere they went so that the others could come to know the joy of having Jesus as their Savior and Lord.

And it wasn't just to those who were like them. These believers began sharing this great news with other nationalities as they interacted with them in the office, or on the bus, or in the grocery store, or at the post office. They were so filled with the joy of knowing that Jesus Christ loved them, and then died for them to remove the death sentence of sin from them, that they wanted everyone to know. They even told the Gentiles, the ones outside of the Jewish religion.

And they weren't obnoxious about it, like getting in another's face and telling them, "Did you know that Christ died for your sins!?" No, they developed a relationship with the people

around them. And as they got familiar with all that was going on in their life, they introduced Jesus to them so that they could find hope and love and joy and peace in their life, too.

And we are told, “*The Lord’s hand was with them and a great number of people believed and turned to the Lord*” (Acts 11:21). It was one hungry person telling another hungry person where to find food. It was one person loving their neighbor so much that they wanted them to find God’s filling in their life so that they would not have to suffer starvation any more. It was real to them, and they rejoiced in sharing that good news with everyone around them.

So what happened through the years? Why have we become so afraid to tell others about our faith in Jesus? Why do we hesitate to give information to those around us? Why are we so content to have faith for ourselves, that we don’t care about the next person who is dying from spiritual starvation? Has Jesus become that boring to us? Have we lost the love of Jesus in our own hearts so that there is really nothing for us to share with another? Is there so little appreciation for what Jesus did for us that we just don’t care about it? While there are millions of people dying of spiritual starvation, it seems we just don’t care enough about them that we go on in our own life and let the dead bury the dead.

Oh, there are millions of reasons that we can give why we don’t share our faith with another person. People tell me all the time, “I’m not a pastor (well you don’t have to be). I’m not a Bible scholar (well, you can change that). I don’t know enough about it (how much do you need to know to share with someone who has nothing?). What if someone challenges my testimony (it happened to you, so what can they challenge?)? My work space won’t allow it (so take them out for coffee or lunch). I’m too shy (you talk to your friends don’t you?). I don’t like talking to others (what, you’re a hermit?). My faith is a personal thing (so how did you learn about Jesus? Someone else must have shared their faith with you. Can’t you pass it along?). I

don't want them to get angry with me (their anger might be due to others trying to force religion down their throat. Just love on them.). I just want to be their friend (and so you watch your friend die spiritually and go to hell? What a friend you are!).”

You see, there is NO REASON why you can't tell another person about what Jesus has done in your life. If you were starving for food, you'd want someone to hand you even a morsel of food, wouldn't you? So if they are starving for spiritual food, why not share some with them so that they can become nourished and find eternal life at the same time? It doesn't have to be the whole wagon load. Little bits at a time work marvelously until they're ready for more.

But one of the saddest reasons that people don't share their faith with another is that they don't have real faith in Jesus to begin with. They may claim to be a Christian, but they're not following Jesus. I know that's a harsh thing for me to say, but think about it. If we don't know Jesus, we can't share Jesus with someone else. If we don't have the love of Jesus in our lives, then we can't share the love of Jesus with them. If we have no relationship with Jesus, then there's no way we can instruct another about having a relationship with Jesus. We must have Jesus as our Savior and Lord in order to let others know about Him.

So if you aren't comfortable sharing Jesus with another person, when will you start improving your relationship with Jesus so that you can share Him with another? You see, Jesus came to this world to “*seek and to save that which was lost*” (Luke 19:10). And “*to all who did receive Him, to those who believed in His name, He gave the right to become children of God...*” (John 1:12). And then, “*...God did not appoint us to suffer wrath but to receive salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ. He died for us so that, whether we are awake or asleep, we may live together with him. Therefore encourage one another and build each other up...*” (I Thessalonians 5:9-11). That's what being a Christ follower involves - living for Jesus and

helping others to live for Jesus, too. When we really fall in love with Jesus our hearts and minds are changed to the point where we can't help but share it with those around us.

When the people in Antioch heard the Good News about Jesus, they received it with great joy. Their hearts were filled with new life. Their worries about all the things of this world blew away, for they came to know there was something beyond this life. They were rejoicing in a God who loved them so much that He would go even to the grave to rescue us and bring life to us again. It was such Good News for them that it changed their hearts and lives and made them new creatures in Christ Jesus. And that hope of new life transformed the lives of so many in Antioch that the church in Jerusalem “*sent Barnabas to Antioch*” (Acts 11:22) so that he could continue to help the church grow and to continue to help people learn about Jesus so that they could believe in Him as their Savior.

And the work was so productive, that “*Barnabas went to Tarsus to look for Saul, and when he found him, he brought him to Antioch. So for a whole year Barnabas and Saul met with the church and taught great numbers of people*” (11:25-26). There was such spiritual starvation amongst the people of Antioch that people kept turning to those who believed in Jesus so that they could become fed by the Word of God through Jesus. Barnabas and Saul continued sharing the spiritual nourishment of Jesus with them so that many were filled and came to faith in the Lord. And so many people in Antioch were turning to the Lord Jesus, that the population of Greeks in Antioch labeled them “Christians.”

A. E. Harvey explains it this way; “So long as all Christians were Jews, to the outside world they appeared simply as a Jewish sect, and there was no need to distinguish them by a particular name; and since all Jews believed in some sort of future Messiah or ‘Christ’, the name ‘Christian’ could never have arisen in Jewish circles as that of those particular Jews who

worshipped Jesus (their name for them, in fact, was usually ‘Nazarenes’). But as soon as the new religion began to spread to non-Jews, some distinctive title for its adherents was necessary, not least for the convenience of the Roman administration, which had to decide how this minority was to be treated. The Jews were granted special privileges for their religion. Should the same be extended to this new sect, even though some of its members were not Jews? We have evidence of this question becoming acute at the end of the century, and it is likely that it was already an issue at Rome under Nero in the sixties (CE). We do not know whether the government of Syria had already had to tackle the question in Antioch; but it can hardly be an accident that the name given there to the members of this new religion was not Greek but Latin: *Christiani*.²

The term “Christian” is only used three times in the Bible (Acts 11:26; 26:28; I Peter 4:16), and it was used out of scorn toward those who decided to follow Jesus. It wasn’t until the second century (CE) that the term was accepted by believers with honor. And thus it has become the common name for those who believed in and followed Jesus.

But the distinguishing quality of those with this name was that they lived their faith and freely shared that faith in Jesus with those around them. A Christian was known because of their actions of love and kindness, gentleness and respect, joy and peace, even in the harshest of situations. The love of Jesus in the hearts of the followers changed their whole life to the point that there was no problem identifying those who followed Christ. They lived radically different than all those around them, and that caught the attention of everyone else.

So when a prophet predicted a famine that would affect the whole area, these followers of Jesus began to plan how to help the people in Judea. They would be the ones most affected by

² (A.E. Harvey, *Companion to the New Testament*, [Cambridge, G.B.: Oxford University Press, 1970] pg. 440-441)

the famine, so the new believers began sharing what they had with those who would have nothing, in order to encourage them and help them through the situation.

We have the same opportunities today. People all around the United States have been affected by harsh weather, destroying homes, devastating crops, wiping out businesses, and leaving many without heat, electricity, water, food, and shelter. As followers of Jesus, can we, too, support those who have little or nothing left as a sign of our being Christians? Can we also demonstrate our own faith in the Lord Jesus by reaching out to the ones that are hit the hardest with disaster and war and persecution?

Our world today is suffering so much, and we have the answers to the problems. We have the source of life for everyone who desires to believe in Jesus Christ. But, are we being the living witnesses that Jesus has called us to be? That is something that only you can determine, for you know your own life the best.

I pray that you fall in love with Jesus so much that your life changes from spiritually starved to spiritually overflowing. And as that happens, Jesus uses you to help others find the spiritual nourishment they need, even as they receive the physical nourishment they need. But the choice is up to you. Let's pray.

Father, it is so easy for us to call ourselves followers of Jesus, but are we really following Jesus? When we claim the name of Christian, may You work so deeply within us that we can't help but demonstrate the difference Jesus makes as we live our lives before others. May everything we do and say reflect our faith in Jesus so that there is no doubt that we live what we believe. Open our eyes, Lord, so that we might see Jesus, and then see those around us that need to see Jesus, too. Set our hearts on fire so that we shine the love of Jesus everywhere we go, thereby feeding the hungry with the Word of Christ. We pray this all in Jesus' Name. AMEN.