

¹⁹ Now those who were scattered after the persecution that arose over Stephen traveled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus, and Antioch, preaching the word to no one but the Jews only. ²⁰ But some of them were men from Cyprus and Cyrene, who, when they had come to Antioch, spoke to the Hellenists, preaching the Lord Jesus. ²¹ And the hand of the Lord was with them, and a great number believed and turned to the Lord. ²² Then news of these things came to the ears of the church in Jerusalem, and they sent out Barnabas to go as far as Antioch. ²³ When he came and had seen the grace of God, he was glad, and encouraged them all that with purpose of heart they should continue with the Lord. 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. ²⁵ Then Barnabas departed for Tarsus to seek Saul. ²⁶ And when he had found him, he brought him to Antioch. So it was that for a whole year they assembled with the church and taught a great many people. And the disciples were first called Christians in Antioch. ²⁷ And in these days prophets came from Jerusalem to Antioch. ²⁸ Then one of them, named Agabus, stood up and showed by the Spirit that there was going to be a great famine throughout all the world, which also happened in the days of Claudius Caesar. ²⁹ Then the disciples, each according to his ability, determined to send relief to the brethren dwelling in Judea. ³⁰ This they also did, and sent it to the elders by the hands of Barnabas and Saul.

Text: Acts 11:19-30 A 4-29-18 1 John 4:1-11 John 15:9-17 Psalm 145 Resp. Ps.: 28
Hymns: 200 (1-4), 200 (5-8), 423, 507

WHAT IT MEANS TO BE A CHRISTIAN

It means –

- 1. suffering, but receiving strength**
- 2. spreading Christ's saving Gospel**
- 3. faithfully believing and teaching Christ's Word**
- 4. a life of service to others for Jesus' sake**
- 5. being most blessed!**

Jesus, I my cross have taken, All to leave and follow Thee;
Destitute, despised, forsaken, Thou from hence my All shalt be.
Perish every fond ambition, All I've sought or hoped or known;
Yet how rich is my condition God and heaven are still my own.

Let the world despise and leave me, They have left my Savior, too.
Human hearts and looks deceive me; Thou art not, like them, untrue.
And while Thou shalt smile upon me, God of wisdom, love, and might,
Foes may hate and friends may shun me; Show Thy face, and all is bright.

(TLH #423:1-2)

Dear fellow believers in Christ,

There's a lot of confusion over what it means to be a Christian, even among some who consider themselves to be Christians. This morning from God's Word we'll see what it means to be a Christian.

– 1 –

The faithful believer Stephen had recently been martyred. The Bible says that as a result “*a great persecution arose against the church which was at Jerusalem; and they were all scattered*” because of the persecution (Ac. 8:1). Jesus has told us, “*If they persecuted Me, they will also persecute you*” (Jn. 15:20). Since people persecuted the Son of God Himself, then people will persecute us, His followers.

Jesus says, “*If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me*” (Mt. 16:24). Being a Christian means that we sometimes suffer for Jesus’ sake. Jesus gave Stephen the strength to follow Him even though it cost Stephen his life. Although the persecution that broke out in Jerusalem after Stephen’s death forced many of the Christians to leave the city, Jesus gave them the strength to continue to follow Him. Being a Christian means receiving strength from Jesus.

When Jesus calls on us to suffer for His sake, He gives us the strength we need to remain faithful to Him. He promises us in His Word, “*Fear not, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you, yes, I will help you, I will uphold you with My righteous right hand*” (Is. 41:10).

– 2 –

We’re told that the believers who left Jerusalem “*traveled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus, and Antioch, preaching the Word to no one but the Jews only.*” The persecution Jesus’ enemies hoped would stamp out the Christian Church and stop the spread of the Gospel had the opposite effect. The believers who fled Jerusalem spread the Gospel wherever they went.

They spread the Good News that Jesus Christ is the promised Messiah. As we know from what happened on Pentecost, Jews from all around the Mediterranean Sea area had heard about Jesus and knew He had been crucified (Ac. 2:1ff.). The believers told their fellow Jews that Jesus had risen from the dead, and urged them to believe in Jesus and be saved.

We’re told that some believers “*from Cyprus*” (an island near that area) “*and Cyrene*” (a far-off city on the northern coast of Africa) “*came to Antioch and spoke to the Hellenists*” (Greeks), “*preaching the Lord Jesus.*” The Jewish Christians from Jerusalem had only been witnessing to other Jews. Now Jewish Christians from Cyprus and Cyrene were witnessing to Gentiles. The Lord had recently sent Peter to witness to the Gentile Cornelius and his family, who became believers (Ac. 10 and 11). As more and more Jewish Christians heard about it they began witnessing also to Gentiles. Antioch is where this really started.

God had foretold throughout the Old Testament that the Messiah would be the Savior both of the Jews and of the Gentiles – all people. “*For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life*” (Jn.

3:16). As Christ's people we tell everyone we can that Jesus died for their sins on the cross, and that by believing in Jesus they are saved.

As the believers witnessed to the Gentiles in Antioch *"the hand of the Lord was with them, and a great number believed and turned the Lord."* Satan cannot stop the spread of the Gospel. And Satan cannot stop the Gospel from working in people's hearts and bringing them to believe in Jesus and be saved. Jesus has told us, *"My Word ... that goes forth from My mouth ... shall not return to Me empty, but it shall accomplish what I please, and it shall prosper in the thing for which I sent it"* (Is. 55:11).

"News of these things came to the ears of the church in Jerusalem, and they sent out Barnabas to go as far as Antioch. ... He was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and of faith." Just after Paul was converted, it was Barnabas who first welcomed him into the group of Christians in Jerusalem and helped them to accept Paul as a fellow believer (Ac. 9:26-28). Later when Paul went on his first missionary journey the Holy Spirit chose Barnabas to go with him (Ac. 13:1ff.).

We're told that when Barnabas came to Antioch *"he encouraged them all that with purpose of heart they should continue with the Lord."* The members of the Antioch congregation were new Christians. Barnabas helped them to grow in their knowledge and understanding of God's Word, and in their faith in Jesus.

When we come to church we expect to hear in every sermon about Jesus and His death on the cross for our sins and our salvation in Him. Peter admonishes us, *"Beloved, ... beware lest you fall from your own steadfastness, being led away with the error of the wicked; but grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ"* (2 Pet. 3:17-18a). Through God's Word we grow in our knowledge and understanding of Jesus and what He did for us and continues to do for us, and so grow in our faith in Him. We share with others what the Bible says about Jesus so they can believe in Him and grow in their faith. Being a Christian means spreading Christ's saving Gospel.

– 3 –

We're told, *"Then Barnabas departed for Tarsus to seek Saul. And when he had found him he brought him to Antioch. So it was that for a whole year they assembled with the church and taught a great many people."* What a blessing for the Antioch congregation to have Barnabas and Paul with them for a year, thoroughly instructing them in the teachings of God's Word!

Jesus tells us, *"If anyone loves Me, he will keep My Word; and My Father will love him, and We will come to him and make Our home with him"* (Jn. 14:23). In His Great Commission to us to *"go and make disciples of all nations"* Jesus has told us to be *"teaching them to obey all things I have commanded you"* (Mt. 28:19-20). Being a Christian means faithfully believing and teaching Christ's Word.

– 4 –

Our text speaks of a prophet named Agabus who, by the power of the Holy Spirit, predicted a great famine that was coming. When it did it we're told that the members of the Antioch congregation "*determined to send relief to the brethren dwelling in Judea*" (which was especially hard hit by the famine). "*This they also did, and sent it to the elders by the hands of Barnabas and Saul.*" They sent money to their fellow believers who were in need.

After Jesus washed His disciples' feet He told them, "*If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have given you an example, that you should do as I have done to you*" (Jn. 13:14-15). As Jesus "*did not come not to be served, but to serve and to give His life a ransom for many*" (Mt. 20:28), so He calls us to humbly serve others. Being a Christian means a life of service to others for Jesus' sake.

– 5 –

We're told, "*And the disciples were first called Christians in Antioch.*" John says, "*Behold, what manner of love the Father has bestowed on us, that we should be called children of God!*" (1 Jn. 3:1). We are God's people by faith in His Son, Jesus. Jesus assures us, "*I know My own, and My own know Me*" (Jn. 10 14: 23, NASB). Jesus knows each one of us, and each of us knows Jesus. By faith in Jesus our sins are forgiven, and we are saved. We live in Christ and for Christ now, and we will live with Christ forever in heaven. Being a Christian means that we are most blessed.

What does it mean to be a Christian? Being a Christian means that we sometimes suffer for Jesus' sake, but we receive strength from Him. Being a Christian means that we spread Christ's saving Gospel. Being a Christian means that we faithfully believe and teach Christ's Word. Being a Christian means a life of service to others for Jesus' sake. Being a Christian means that we are forgiven and saved and going to heaven. Truly, of all people we Christians are most blessed!

Take, my soul, thy full salvation; Rise over sin and fear and care;
 Joy to find in every station, Something still to do or bear.
 Think what Spirit dwells within thee, What a Father's smile is thine,
 What a Savior died to win thee; Child of heaven, shouldst thou repine?

Haste, then, on from grace to glory, Armed by faith and winged by prayer;
 Heaven's eternal day's before thee, God's own hand shall guide thee there.
 Soon shall close the earthly mission, Swift shall pass thy pilgrim days,
 Hope soon change to glad fruition, Faith to sight, and prayer to praise. Amen.

(TLH #423:5-6)