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Acts 11 "Antioch"

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"Father in Heaven, we have enjoyed the music, prayers, the offerings. We've enjoyed it all. We came here to worship You, and now Lord we are moving into the time of the service when Your Word will be opened and this Heavenly Father we pray is a time that You will manifest Yourself with such power that everyone here will be affected and changed for eternity. We pray Heavenly Father that You will inform our hearts, instruct our minds and inspire our souls. We are just pleading for something supernatural and wonderful to take place. We pray that You will be the One who instructs us through Your word, and that we will hear the very things You want us to hear. We ask and we pray this in Jesus' name, Amen."

Would you choose twelve men who are unqualified and don't get along, and don't understand what you are doing, would you choose those twelve men to start a church? It's unlikely, but God did. Would you take those few men and some others and have them gather in a room, and then to initiate an evangelistic campaign to the community with the announcement be a large, large sound, loud sound that sounded like the wind? It's unlikely, but God did. Would you take the man who was the initiator of the great persecution against the church, and turn that man into a great leader in the church? Would you do that? It's unlikely, but God did. You see, God specializes in the unlikely. God soars in the realm of the impossible. God who had no beginning and God who has no end, and God who could just speak and this world came into existence, and God who holds the heavens in their place just by His thought processes, that God specializes in the impossibility, or in the impossible, and He specializes in the unlikely.

Now suppose you were making plans back in the days when the Christian church was beginning; would you say, "All right, we've been preaching to the Jews here, now a little persecution has broken out, we have to leave the city. So first thing we are going to do, we are going to preach to the people we hate the most, the Samaritans." Would you do that? It's unlikely, but that's what God did. And then, when it came time for Gospel to go to the world, would you say, "Yes, let's go to Antioch, that's where we need to start." Would you do that? It is unlikely, but God did. I'll teach you today why it was unlikely.

We find the story in Acts chapter 11, please turn there. Acts chapter 11, the story continues as Luke is writing it, and we are going to read verses 19-21. Acts 11 verse 19, Luke writes this: "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. 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. And the hand of the Lord was with them. And the great number believed and turned to the Lord."

Let's get a little time frame here. The last time we were together, we discussed Peter. Peter had a vision. And in that vision he was instructed that God was going to open doors in his thinking. That he was not to call men "Common or unclean," and in that story Peter would go to the house of Cornelius, a Gentile. He would enter the house, he would preach the gospel to Cornelius and the Holy Spirit would be poured out. In the first part of chapter 11, it's kind of the story

continuing because Peter goes back to Jerusalem and he is called out on the carpet by people in the church saying, “How is it that you being a Jew would go and eat with a Gentile?” And so Peter explains the story to them, and they say “Wow, apparently God’s plan is for the Gospel to go to the Gentiles.”

When you come to verse 19, it says, “Now those who were scattered after the persecution that arose over Stephen, traveled.” In Acts 8 verse 1 we read about that experience. In fact, let’s read it again, some of you weren’t here. Let’s read Acts chapter 8 verse 1. “Now Saul was consenting to his death...” that’s referring to Stephen. “...at that time great persecution arose against the church which was at Jerusalem, and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria except the apostles. The twelve stayed in Jerusalem, the rest were scattered throughout the area.”

Now when you come to verse 19 of chapter 11, Luke refers to it and it would seem that all of the events taking place between the 8:1 and 11:19 just happened rapidly, very quickly, and we are just looking at weeks or months. But let me give you the time line. Pentecost happened in the year 31. Stephen was stoned in the year 34. Saul is converted in the year 35. You remember, he accepts Christ as the Savior, he stays in Damascus for a little bit, he goes into Arabia for three years, comes back to Damascus, the Jews seek to kill him so he is lowered in the basket outside the city wall. He runs to Jerusalem, he is there just 15 days and then they send him to Tarsus. So from 35 when he is converted until he goes to Tarsus is three years. He is in Tarsus in the year 38.

When you come to Acts 11 verse 19, and the Gospel going to the city of Antioch, we are looking at the year 44. So we are looking at 10 years after the stoning of Stephen. 10 years after the stoning of Stephen. Later in the story when we read about it in the future, Barnabas will invite Saul to come to Antioch and they’ll spend some time there. So during this time Saul has been at least 6 years in Tarsus. That’s just good to know because many of us have the impression, you know, “The guy accepted Christ, and he’s just riding around on the motorcycle, going everywhere, preaching Him.” Now he stayed in Tarsus for at least 6 years, and then he is invited to Antioch. From there he will go on his missionary journeys.

So let’s go back to Acts 11 verse 20. When Luke comes to verse 19 and says, you know, he reminds us of where he left off. 8:1, persecution, here is all that takes place, now remember that persecution, then he moves forward. Verse 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. Now it is very likely that the Gospel got to Antioch ahead of these men. I’ll tell you why. In Acts chapter 6 when one of the 7, we call them deacons, they were just called “one of the 7.” But in Acts chapter 6 verse 5 it mentions one of the 7. And it says, “And the saying pleased the whole multitude. And they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit, and Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolas, a proselyte from Antioch...” Nicolas is a proselyte from Antioch.

Now, when the persecution broke out, it is very, very likely that he went back home. He went to Antioch. And so he’s been there preaching to the Jews about Jesus Christ. 10 years later, some others come and they began to preach to the Hellenists. Some of your Bibles say Greeks. There

is a long explanation about the use of the Greek word there and how it can be translated different ways. The long and short of it is, they are preaching to the Gentiles at Antioch. And so now, the Gospel has gone from the Samaritans to Cornelius. And you know it's one thing to have the Gospel go to the Samaritans; they are half Jews. And then it's another thing to go to a Gentile, Cornelius, but he was a friend of the Jews and he was friendly to the Jews. Now the Gospel is going to full-blown pagans in Antioch. And if we were planning the movements of God, and the movements of His church, we would not do it this way. Why? Because of Antioch!

Let me explain to you about the city of Antioch. Antioch was 300 miles North of Jerusalem. It was a city of somewhere between 250 and 500 thousand people. It was the third largest city in the Empire. You had Rome, Alexandria, and Antioch. Antioch was located 15 miles inland on the Orontes River. It had a harbor at the mouth of the river. And what they would do is, they would unload the large ships and they would bring the goods up in barges or they would just bring them on wagons. It was easy to get to that city. It was a cosmopolitan city. It was a trend setting city. It was a city that was a byword. Antioch meant *luxurious immorality*. It was famous for chariot racing, it was famous for other sporting events, the pursuit of pleasure day and night, and gambling and night-clubs was the day. I don't know if they called them back then, but this is a city filled with casinos.

Antioch! It was influential to the culture of the Roman Empire. There was a gentleman named Jewenile (sp?) who wrote back in those days. I have a quote from him. Before I read it I want to explain couple of things. The Orontes River runs in Syria, and runs through Antioch. Then there is another river that will be mentioned in this quote and it's the Tiber River. The Tiber runs in Italy and comes near Rome. So he is going to use a little bit of a metaphor here, but notice what he says, quote: "The Syrian Orontes has long since poured into the Tiber bringing with it its lingual and its manners, its flutes, and its slanting harp strings." End quote, (Jewenile). What he is saying is, the influence of Antioch is incredible. It's as if the Orontes is pouring into the Tiber and we are becoming like them. Antioch was setting the stage. It was the Hollywood, Las Vegas scene of the Roman Empire. It was the seat of immorality.

Now Antioch was famous for a park that was there. The park was a couple of miles away from town but it was where people loved to go. It was the famous park called, Daphnis. Now I need to give you a little mythology background so you can appreciate Daphnis. There was one of the gods in the Greek pantheon of gods. His name was Apollo. He was one of the top gods. I apologize but I don't know who their top god was. It may have been him? But I know he is up there, he is way up there. And he was the god of the sun, god of prophecy, god of music, god of poetry and the god of medicine. He was a busy god. He had lots to do. And he was worshiped. This guy fell in love with Daphnis. And ladies, this is just a beautiful love story. You are going to be warmed inside as we think about it.

Here you have a Greek god. And you know the expression, "He is build like a Greek god." Well, he was a Greek god, and he fell in love with Daphnis. Oh he just loved her. And he did what women love, he pursued her. He wooed her, he wowed her, and he won her. And she was in love with him and he was in love with her, and beautiful story except for one minor problem. You see Apollo is, in Greek mythology, immortal. Daphnis would be mortal. And it's pretty hard to be immortal and in love with something or someone that is mortal. So he fixed it. He fixed her. He

turned her into a Loral bush so they could always be together. Well that just kind of takes the love out of it, doesn't it? So ladies, the moral is, don't fall for Greek gods.

But anyways, Daphnis! They had this park where in the center of the park they had a temple dedicated to Apollo. And all around with these beautiful Loral bushes, worship to Apollo would take place. Here is how that worship worked. The priestesses of the temple were actually sacred prostitutes. And every night the worship service went like this: The men would be Apollo, the prostitute would be Daphnis and they would pursue. The men would pursue the women. I don't know how they did it, I didn't care to read about it, but eventually what happens is, the worship culminates in immoral act and everybody goes home. Now I have jokingly thought, "Well, that would increase attendance at prayer meeting." But it would really weaken the morals, would it not? And consequently it did. And it became a byword, a saying all through the ancient world, *the morals of Daphnis*. That was a frame known to identify somebody with loose and lustful living.

This is Antioch. This is the first place that the Gospel is going to go to the world. Antioch! How unlikely, but yet, there is God. God oftentimes is in the unlikely. Let's look at Acts 11 again. Acts 11 verse 21 as it describes them preaching there, it says: "And the hand of the Lord was with them, and a great number believed and turned to the Lord." The hand of the Lord was with these men and great things happened. "The hand of the Lord" was an expression that meant the presence and the power of God. The presence and the power of God were with them and this city was turned upside down.

Now that can be a good thing to have the hand of the Lord upon you, or it can be a bad thing. In Acts 13 verse 11 it's a bad thing. I'd like you to turn there. Paul is preaching on the island of Paphos to a fellow named, Sergius Paulus. It identifies him as being an intelligent man. But there is Elymas the sorcerer who was undermining everything Paul was saying. And Paul is getting ticked off. Verse 11, here is Paul: "And now indeed the hand of the Lord is upon you, and you shall be blind, not seeing the sun for a time. And immediately a dark mist fell on him, and he went around seeking someone to lead him by the hand." So the hand of the Lord was upon him here in judgments. The presence and the power of the Lord; Acts chapter 11 verse 21 it says that the hand of the Lord was with them.

Now that's mentioned several times in the Bible: "The hand of the Lord." We find Luke using that expression in chapter 1 of his Gospel. Let's turn there. Luke chapter 1 verse 66; we want to seek to understand what it means. In Luke 1 verse 66, it's here that Luke is referring to John who will become John the Baptist. He is just a baby here. And it says in verse 66: "And all those who heard them kept them in their hearts, shying, "What kind of child will this be?" And the hand of the Lord was with him." So as a baby, the hand of the Lord was with John. The presence and the power of the Lord were with John as a baby.

Now the story, in order for us to understand it and appreciated it, and see what we can glean from it for our own lives, let's look at Luke chapter 1 verse 11. "Then an angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing at the right side of the altar of incense." It's talking about Zacharias. Zacharias is an old man, married to a woman named Elizabeth. Zacharias is a priest and it's the time for him to go serve at the temple. He is inside the Holy Place. He is there at the altar of

incense offering prayer. And while he is doing that, all of a sudden an angel shows up. And he is scared. It says in verse 12: “And when Zacharias saw him, he was troubled, and fear fell upon him. But the angel said to him, “Do not be afraid, Zacharias, for your prayer is heard; and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you shall call his name John.”

Now just make a mental note of this phrase. “Do not be afraid Zacharias for your prayer is heard.” Just make a mental note of that. “Your prayer is heard.” So he is an old man, he is praying. And in fact, verse 18 it says: “Zacharias said to the angel, “How shall I know this? For I am an old man, and my wife is well advanced in years.” And again we come back to that concept about God. If you are God, would you choose an old man and an old woman to give birth to the man whom Jesus will call “The greatest prophet that ever lived?” It’s unlikely, but God did. And then we read verse 15. In describing the baby John it says: “For he will be great in the sight of the Lord, and shall drink neither wine nor strong drink. He will also be...” what? “...Filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mothers’ womb.”

What does it mean to have the hand of the Lord upon you? To be filled with the Spirit of God. That’s what it means. Now just because we are here in Luke chapter 1, I want to refer you to 1 verse. This verse may make the sermon for some of you, verse 37. Look at chapter 1 verse 37, it says: “For with God...” what does it say, “...nothing will be impossible.” Now think of your life. Do you have things in your life that are, when you look at them, you could say, “This is an impossible situation. It is very unlikely that God can do anything here. I am in a corner, or they are in a corner, of we’ve got this difficulty, this has happened, this is going on,” what ever it is. Well, I have good news for you. God works in the impossible and God works in the unlikely. And that’s what He did, all through the Scriptures. And He does it by manifesting His presence.

Now this will happen in First Kings chapter 18, verse 46. It’s a story of Elijah. And in the story, it’s the familiar story of where he goes up on the mountain, he calls his reel together, they have the showdown. And at the end of the showdown, the priests of Baal are killed, and Elijah kneels down and prays. He prays seven times. It hasn’t rained for three and a half years. He asks a servant who is with him to keep looking up in the sky. And the servant says, “I see a cloud about the size of a man’s hand.” Elijah says to Ahab who is still there, “Get in your chariot and get down because the storm is coming.” And when you read about it in First Kings 18 verses 45 and 46, it describes that the sky became black and dark. And the wind blew, and then a strong and heavy rain fell. The next thing you read is, the hand of the Lord was upon Elijah, and Elijah girded up his loins and ran in front of the chariot back to Jezreel.

Now here is what’s happening. The wind and the rain are so strong; the horses are being blinded by it. They can’t stay on the road. The hand of the Lord comes upon Elijah, he holds onto the reins of the horses, and he runs in front of them to lead the chariot back to Jezreel. It’s almost 20 miles. When the hand of the Lord comes upon a person, they are much stronger than they were before. But what does this have to do with us? Well, we will find that the hand of the Lord can be upon us. We find that in the story of Nehemiah. Look at Nehemiah chapter 2. You’ll find Nehemiah, if you find Psalms go forward pass Job, and you’ll find Nehemiah. Nehemiah is in the middle of Old Testament but it was actually written about 425 years before Christ. It could be in the back because that’s when it takes place. It’s one of the last stories of the Old Testament.

It takes place after the Babylonian captivity. The people have already been released to go back to Jerusalem if they want, but it's not going well for them. In Nehemiah chapter 2 verse 8, the expression that "Hand of God was upon me," is the very last part of the verse. It says, "And the King granted them to me, according to the good hand of my God upon me."

Here is what happens. There is a fellow named Hanania who comes to the place where Nehemiah lives. He comes there, and Nehemiah says, "Hey, how are things back in Judah?" That's where he's come from. And he says, "Oh, it's not well, the city walls are still just rubble, nothing has been rebuilt," and Nehemiah goes into a depression. This guy is a butler. He is a cup bearer for the King. He serves the King tea. And over time the king says, "Hey what's wrong with you? You seem to be down." And he says, "Well, yeah I am. My city lies in ruins. And the King kind of sensing something, says, "Well what do you want?" And he says, "Well, give me permission to go back and rebuild it. Rebuild the walls." The King does. In fact, gives him permission and a letter to even have the King's men cut down wood and provide the wood out of the forest to rebuild the walls. "The hand of my good God was upon me," he says.

Well how did that happen and what does that have to do with us? Well, first of all let me tell you about Nehemiah. There was tremendous opposition. There were enemies that came up. There were false prophets that lied. There were death threats, there were impossible situations. It was to the point where he had some standing guard, some working. And then ultimately, those working, in one hand they had a sword and in one hand they had a trowel. And they were laying bricks with one hand, and had a sword in the other. That's how dangerous it was. But if you read the whole story you discover that in 52 days, they rebuild the entire wall. It's just a miracle. The hand of the Lord was upon them.

But how did that happen? Look at chapter 1 verse 1: "The words of Nehemiah, the son of Hachaliah. It came to pass in the month of Chislev..." Now the month of Chislev, in the Jewish calendar Chislev was the ninth month. Now I don't have a Jewish calendar, but I have a calendar and so do you. So we are just going to say in the month of September. Okay, does that work for you? So in the month of September he gets this information, and he finds out that things aren't going well. We read in verse 4 what he does. "So it was, when I heard these words, that I sat down and wept, and mourned form many days; I was fasting and praying before the God of heaven."

The first thing that Nehemiah did was he began to fast and to pray. Now the reason we are going through here is quite simple. If indeed the hand of the Lord is His presence and power in our life, and if indeed the hand of the Lord is being filled with the Holy Spirit, then I want to know how we can experience that. And Nehemiah shares that with his experience. Nehemiah begins the process by fasting and by praying. He says in verse 5. "I pray Lord God of heaven, the great and awesome God, You who keep your covenant and mercy with those who love You and observe Your commandments, please let Your ear be attentive and Your eyes open, that You may hear the prayer of Your servant which I pray before You now, day and night..."

So he is fasting some, and he is praying day and night. And it says, "...for the children of Israel Your servants, and confess the sins of the children of Israel which we have sinned against You. Both my father's house and I have sinned." He begins the process by praying. He is praying

morning, he is praying at night, he is fasting some, and now he is repenting. He is asking God for forgiveness for the sin in his life. Verse 8, it's just an amazing verse here in verse 8, "Remember, I pray, the word that You commanded Your servant Moses, saying, 'If you are unfaithful, I will scatter you among the nations.'" Now that's already happened. That's why Jerusalem was in destruction, or why it was destroyed. It's because they had been unfaithful.

Notice verse 9: "But ..." and he is quoting God, "...if you return to me and keep my commandments and do them, though some of you were cast out to the farthest part of the heavens, yet I will gather them from there and bring them to the place which I have chosen as a dwelling for My name." First thing Nehemiah does in September is he starts to fast and pray. He is praying morning, and he is praying in the night. He is repenting before God. He is confessing the sins of his people, the sins of his father, his father's household and his own sins. And then he is claiming the promises of God. Notice what he says: "You said God, that if we did what we did, we would be in this horrible mess and here we are. But, You said, if we return to You, if we turn back to You, though we be as far as the heavens away from You, You will gather us back together."

Do you realize what God is saying to us here today? Brothers and sisters, if your sins have caused you to go as far as the heavens away from God, if you'll turn towards Him, He'll gather you back to Him. It's an amazing picture here. So Nehemiah, you can picture him. Praying in the morning, praying at night, he is fasting sometimes. He is confessing the sins of his people, and of his family, and of himself, and He is claiming God's promises. Then you come to chapter 2 verse 1: "And it came to pass in the month of Nisan..." That's when the King gives him permission to go. Well, when is the month of Nisan? The month of Nisan is the first month of the Jewish calendar. So for us it would be; we begin the process in September and sometimes in January God moves, and God acts. So for four months, this man is praying to God. For four months he is confessing the sins of his people, and of himself. And for four months he is claiming the promises of God. And in that seeking, and in that mode, the hand of the Lord comes upon him, and God uses him for a great work.

Now let me explain something to you about spirituality. Prior to us accepting Christ, God is seeking us. Did you hear that? Prior to us accepting Christ, God is the One seeking us. After we accept Christ, it is expected that we would seek God. If we do not seek God, we will not grow. They did a survey a number of years ago, and discovered that 80% of all adults who were baptized, well, 80% of adults, and this was all across denominations in America. 80% of adults had not grown spiritually beyond the level they were when they were baptized. And that didn't matter if they were baptized as a child, or baptized as an adult. 80% of them had not grown. Why? Prior to accepting Christ, God is seeking us. After that we are to seek Him. He says: "You'll find me..." how, "...when you seek for me with all your heart."

Nehemiah sought for God. Nehemiah spent time with God in prayer and because of that, God poured His hand out upon him. And let me ask you this. If you were going to send a man to rebuild a city, and to have to organize them to be an army and to be builders, and the worshipers of God, all at the same time, would you send a butler? Would you? It's unlikely, but God did. God does things when it seems so unlikely. One last text, First Peter chapter 5, the phrase, "The hand of the Lord" is used again. First Peter chapter 5, we'll be reading verses 6 and 7. Peter

writes this: “Therefore, humble yourselves under the mighty hand of God that He may exalt you in due time...” Notice this, “...casting all your care upon Him for He cares for you.”

Do you have some situations in your life that are impossible? Do you have something going on that is just so unlikely in your mind that God can do something about it, or turn it into good? I am telling you today by the authority of the Word of God; cast those cares upon the Lord because He cares for you. “Humble yourselves under the hand of the Lord, and He will exalt you.”

Today, listen carefully to what I have to say. If you would like to seek after God, if you would like to really strive to have that presence and power of God in your life, and you would like to pray in the morning and pray in the evening; if you would like to fast some. If you would like to spend honest time with God, praying for the sin in your life, and if you would like to claim His promises so that you can draw near to Him. If you would like to do that, then I am going to ask you to stand right where you are at.

“Father in Heaven, bless these dear people. They are standing, and in so doing they are declaring their desire to seek after You. Teach them about Yourself Lord. Help us all to grow closer to You that You could pour Your Spirit upon us, and people could look at us and say, ‘the hand of the Lord is with them.’ We thank You Lord, and now our cares we give to You. We give them to You in Jesus’ name, Amen.”