



The Hand of the Lord

Acts 11:19-26

Lake Arrowhead Church, Waleska, Georgia
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What does it mean to be a Christian? A couple of years ago, Anderson Cooper hosted a CNN special asking that question. As you can imagine, the answers varied widely. The program overlaid a liberal versus conservative political template over Christianity and did not talk about the Gospel or God's grace at all. And the broadcast never defined what it meant to be a Christian. Instead, it showed the various perceptions people have about Christians. So, what is the face of Christianity?

Is the face of Christianity Pope Leo or Joel Osteen? Is it megachurch worship or progressive theology? Is it some street preacher telling people they are going to hell or serving food to the hungry? Or is Christianity a political movement or a prayer movement?

There are so many versions and perceptions of Christianity that's it hard to find consensus on what it means to be a Christian today. But that was not the case in the 1st century.

The book of Acts records the birth of the Church and the thirty-year period following the resurrection of Jesus. The book is filled with dramatic events and incredible stories of faith. Those who were there heard His teaching and witnessed His miracles. They saw Him die and they saw Him alive again. They believed He was the Son of God. They were convinced it was true. They were compelled to talk about it. And they were courageous to take a stand. And the book of Acts continues to be written. We are living and writing our chapter. So the story continues, the mission continues, and it's still about Jesus.

The resurrection happened about eight years earlier and Acts 11 describes the spread of Christianity as persecution intensified.

"Many believers of Jesus were scattered due to persecution that arose after the stoning and death of Stephen and they fled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus, and Antioch. As they fled, they preached the word of God along the way, but only to Jews. Yet some of the believers who went to Antioch began preaching to the Gentiles about the Lord Jesus.

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

When the church at Jerusalem heard what had happened, they sent Barnabas to Antioch. When he arrived and saw the evidence of God's blessing, he was filled with joy, and he encouraged the believers to stay true to the Lord.

And the disciples were first called Christians at Antioch." (Acts 11:19-26)

This story is not about Peter or Paul and any of the other apostles. This story is about anonymous families fleeing persecution and talking about Jesus everywhere they went. They were the first to bear the name of Jesus, the Christ. "The disciples were first called Christians at

Antioch.” And they were talking about Jesus everywhere they went. And the most compelling phrase, “the hand of the Lord was with them.”

Acts 11 is a description of the church then, and I believe, a promise for the church now! ***If you give your life to His name and to His message, His hand will be with you wherever you go!*** If bearing His name and sharing His message means everything to you, then His hand will be with you wherever you go.

THE MESSAGE

Persecution intensified with the stoning and death of Stephen. And Christian families fled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus, and Antioch. Some 100 miles north, on foot, with all they owned, fleeing with their children.

“As they fled, they preached the word of God along the way,” and they “began preaching to the Gentiles about the Lord Jesus” (Acts 11:19-20, NLT).

Jesus is the Gospel. He is message. His love, His sacrifice, His resurrection, His grace – that’s the message. Jesus was why, even though they were fleeing for their lives, they refused to be silent. The natural instinct to protect their families, the natural instinct for survival, did not silence their witness. They talked about Jesus everywhere they went. These “unnamed, unknown, unsung heroes” dared to share Christ in a dark place¹ and at great risk.²

The Gospel defined life for them, as it did for the Apostle Paul. Paul gave his life to the “cause of the gospel,”³ the “truth of the gospel,”⁴ the “peace” of the gospel,⁵ the “mystery of the gospel,”⁶ the “glorious gospel,”⁷ the “eternal gospel.”⁸ He talked about “testifying”⁹ and “proclaiming”¹⁰ the gospel. He talked about advancing¹¹ and defending¹² the gospel. He talked about “suffering for”¹³ and being “in chains for the gospel.”¹⁴ He said, “It has always been my ambition to preach the gospel.”¹⁵ Paul sighed, “Woe is me if I do not preach the gospel ... I do (everything) for the sake of the gospel.”¹⁶ The Gospel defined life for Paul and it defined life for the Christians at Antioch.

Again, Jesus is the Gospel. He is the message.

For Peter and John, the Gospel was a person. They knew Him. They followed Him for three years. They heard His teaching and they witnessed His miracles. They saw Jesus die and they saw Him alive again. That’s why they said, “We cannot stop speaking about what we have seen and heard” (Acts 4:20, NAS). None of us has ever seen Jesus or heard His voice. Our faith is based upon hearing the Gospel as recorded in the Bible and Jesus penetrating our hearts. Jesus is just as real to us as He was to those who heard and saw Him in person. And may we never stop speaking about what we have seen and heard.

THE NAME

Again, parents scooped up their children and were literally on the run. They scattered all over the Mediterranean world. Yet something greater than fear of the Roman sword gripped them.

It was the name. Jesus, the Christ. And “the disciples were first called Christians in Antioch” (Acts 11:26, NAS).

This verse has always grabbed my attention. Because Acts 11 is the story of persecution and fear, but also the story of conviction and courage. It’s the story of real people, people just like us, walking the ancient streets of Antioch talking about their Savior. It’s the story of God’s hand being on them, and the story of embracing a new name. “The disciples were first called Christians at Antioch.”

Hopefully, His name means as much to us as it did to them. And hopefully, we realize *there is no greater privilege or greater responsibility than bearing the name Christian.*

Antioch was not the easiest place to bear the name Christian. On the one hand, Antioch was a lavish city called the “Queen of the East” and “Antioch the Beautiful.”¹⁷ It was the third largest city in the Roman Empire, with a population over half a million. The main avenue was a paved marble street four miles long, lined with statues, trees, fountains, and colonnades, and believed to be the first street in the world lighted at night. But on the other hand, Antioch was a dark, immoral place. People worshiped the goddess Daphne, the female lover of Apollos. Daily re-enactments of their mythical love affair were performed with sexual rituals. In spite of that, Antioch became the birthplace of the missionary movement and the first school of theology. And it was because “the disciples were first called Christians at Antioch.”

Just like our 1st century brothers and sisters, we too are called to bear the name. They represented Christ in Antioch, and we represent Christ in Lake Arrowhead.

The term “Christian” appears in the New Testament only three times. Its infrequent use suggests it was not a term used within the church. Those inside the church called themselves “believers,” “brothers,” “disciples,” or “saints.” “Christian” was a street term. It was an insult. At Paul’s trial, King Agrippa sarcastically said, “In a short time you will persuade me to become a Christian” (Acts 26:28, NAS). So strange were these believers that the people of Antioch would say, “Who are these people? Oh, these are the people who are always talking about Christos, the Christ-people,” and with a demeaning sneer, “the Christians.”¹⁸

The only other use of “Christian” in the New Testament is by Peter, encouraging persecuted believers. “If anyone suffers as a **Christian**, he is not to be ashamed, but is to glorify God *in this name*” (1 Peter 4:16, NAS). Peter turned an insult into a name of pride.

One historian writes, “These believers (at Antioch) continually talked about Christ ... They were constantly sharing the good news ... They were filled and flooded with Christ. His name was on their lips and his character was being formed in them. They were making visible the invisible Christ.”¹⁹

That’s our mission too. To make visible the invisible Christ. To bear His name. *Because there is no greater privilege or greater responsibility than bearing the name of Jesus.*

We bear the name of the one who bore our sins on the cross. As the hammer raised to drive the first nail into His hand, Jesus could have stopped everything. But He didn't.²⁰ Why? Because He cared more about saving us than saving Himself.

We bear the name of the one who, right now, is preparing a place in heaven for us, the one who promises to return and take us home to live with Him forever.²¹

We bear the name of the one before whom, one day, every knee will bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord.²²

We bear the name of the one whom all of heaven is praising at this very moment. "Worthy is the Lamb that was slain ... To Him who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb, be blessing and honor and glory and dominion forever and ever, Amen" (Revelation 5:12-13, NAS).

Hopefully, His name means as much to us as it did to them. And hopefully, we realize *there is no greater privilege or greater responsibility than bearing the name Christian.*

THE HAND

Another phrase in Acts 11 should fill us with extreme confidence. "And the hand of the Lord was with them, and a large number of people believed and turned to the Lord" (Acts 11:21, NAS). This is one of the most compelling verses in the Bible. It's filled with promise, and our response should be "I want that!!!"

"The hand of the Lord was with them." That phrase appears throughout the Bible referring to the presence and power of God.

- The Lord said, "My hand laid the foundation of the earth, and my right hand spread out the heavens" (Isaiah 48:13, ESV). The universe is the creation of His hand.
- Jesus said, "I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand. My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all, and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father's hand" (John 10:28-29, ESV). Our eternity is secure in the hand of God.
- "The word of the Lord came to Ezekiel the priest ... and the hand of the Lord was upon him" (Ezekiel 1:3, ESV).
- The same was true of Ezra. "I took courage, for the hand of the Lord my God was on me, and I gathered men from Israel to go up with me" (Ezra 7:28, ESV). Ezra was able to lead God's people because God's hand led him.
- David's hope was in the hand of the Lord. "My soul clings to You, Your right hand upholds me" (Psalm 63:8, NAS).

- David trusted that victory was in the hand of the Lord. “Though I walk in the midst of trouble, you preserve my life, you stretch out your hand against the wrath of my enemies, and your right hand delivers me” (Psalm 138:7, ESV).
- David found joy in the hand of God. “In Your presence there is fullness of joy, in Your right hand there are pleasures forever” (Psalm 16:11, NAS).
- David also realized, “My times are in Your hand” (Psalm 31:15, NAS). He knew the number of his days was up to God.
- Peter said, “Humble yourselves under the mighty hand of God” (1 Peter 5:6, NAS). Our God is mighty and majestic and sovereign, and we bow before Him.
- The Lord promises, “Do not fear, for I am with you; do not anxiously look about you, for I am your God. I will strengthen you, surely I will help you, surely I will uphold you with My righteous right hand” (Isaiah 41:10, NAS). His hand is with us to face whatever we fear and whatever stands in our way.

“The hand of the Lord was with them.” Think about all that means.

- It means His presence.
- It means we can experience and enjoy a personal, intimate, day-by-day, moment-by-moment relationship with Him.
- It means His power. It means His help when we need it most.
- It means His comfort when we are hurting.
- It means His blessing. Every good thing we enjoy comes from Him.
- It means when we walk in His name, we walk with His authority.
- It means living for His purpose, guaranteed to prevail.
- It means confidence. Knowing the hand of the Lord is with us should fill us with extreme confidence and boldness.

Acts 11:21 is a description of the church then, and a promise for the church now. The hand of the Lord was with them, and the hand of the Lord is with us.

However, in the book of Revelation, Jesus warned the church that unless they repent, He would remove His lampstand from the church.²³ The lampstand represented His presence, His hand. I believe that can happen to a church. If a church is filled with conflict or gossip or sin, God will withdraw His hand. If the people are more concerned with satisfying their personal preferences rather being about the mission, God will withdraw His hand.²⁴ And it can happen personally too. Sin grieves and quenches His Spirit.²⁵ Sin closes His ear to our prayers.²⁶ Sin forces our holy God to withdraw. So, yes, His hand can come and go, in the life of a church and in our personal lives as well. That is a frightening thought.

CONCLUSION

So what do we do? We pray. We pray that our church will look like the church in Acts. “The disciples were first called Christians at Antioch.” There is no greater privilege or greater responsibility than bearing the name Christian. “And the hand of the Lord was with them.” As a church, we are called to bear His name in our community. And if we are faithful, His hand will be on us. And this is a personal promise as well. ***If you give your life to His name and His message, His hand will be with you wherever you go!***

This morning, Wes and Jerry are going to pray over our church. Our prayer is that our church would look like the church in Acts. Our prayer is that we would bear His name and that His hand would be with us.

NOTES

- ¹ Curtis Vaughan, *Acts – A Study Guide Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1974, 1979), page 76.
- ² Bruce, page 225.
- ³ Philippians 4:3.
- ⁴ Galatians 2:5.
- ⁵ Ephesians 6:15.
- ⁶ Ephesians 6:19.
- ⁷ 1 Timothy 1:11.
- ⁸ Revelation 14:6.
- ⁹ Acts 20:24.
- ¹⁰ Romans 15:16, 19.
- ¹¹ Philippians 1:12.
- ¹² Philippians 1:16.
- ¹³ 2 Timothy 1:8.
- ¹⁴ Philemon 13.
- ¹⁵ Romans 15:20.
- ¹⁶ 1 Corinthians 9:16, 9:23.
- ¹⁷ On Antioch see John Stott, *The Spirit, the Church, and the World: The Message of Acts*, (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1990), page 203.
- ¹⁸ F. F. Bruce, *The Book of Acts*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1988), page 228.
- ¹⁹ Gary Vanderet, “The First Christians – Acts 11:19-30,” Peninsula Bible Church Cupertino, January 2, 2005.
- ²⁰ Max Lucado beautifully writes, “Since He couldn’t bear the thought of eternity without you, He choose the nails.” [Max Lucado, *He Choose the Nails*, (Nashville, TN: Word Publishing, 2000), page 34.]
- ²¹ See John 14:2-3.
- ²² See Philippians 2:9-11.
- ²³ See Revelation 2:5, Jesus warning the church at Ephesus.
- ²⁴ Francis Chan warns us this in his book *Letter to the Church*, pages 45-56.
- ²⁵ See Ephesians 4:30 and 1 Thessalonians 5:19.
- ²⁶ See Psalm 66:18.