

THURSDAY 21 July 2022 "Strategic Antioch" (Acts 11:19-21)

Good morning my "Walking with Jesus" friends,

One of the major global issues in recent years has been **'mass migration'** of huge numbers of people. *Sadly, too often the flight of these huge waves of people has been in response to war or criminal activity or extreme poverty or even ethnic cleansing in some parts of our world.* We've all seen the pictures haven't we my friends and they bring tears to our eyes, don't they? Overcrowded little rubber boats going from North Africa across the Mediterranean Sea to Italy; caravans of people on foot from South America and Central America into North America; waves of people from war torn Central Asian and Mid-Eastern countries coming into Europe and of course recently millions of Ukrainian people flooding into neighboring European countries. While the numbers are staggering in recent years, this is not a new phenomenon, is it? *Crisis motivated migration has been a sad reality of our painful world for centuries.*

In our ongoing journey with the apostles of Jesus during the years following His return to heaven, *one of the painful realities of the early first century was a persecution driven migration of Jesus followers from Jerusalem to other parts of the world.* We saw it first recorded for us in Acts 8:1 at the time of the martyrdom of Stephen the deacon. The record says: **"On that day a great persecution broke out against the church in Jerusalem and all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria..."** *That word 'scattered' is persecution driven migration.* People fleeing in the night, leaving behind homes and jobs and taking with them only what they could carry. In most cases they hoped to someday return and resume life in the city they loved, but for many they knew this would be a permanent relocation to start life in a new place. It was a painful time to be alive for Jewish Jesus followers.

But over the past several days we've been looking at the Acts record of what God was doing THROUGH this migration of Jesus followers and it's really quite amazing isn't it my friends? Wherever they went, these passionate followers of Jesus told His story and taught His truth and wave after wave of spiritual revival happened in Samaria, remember in Acts 8; and Damascus, as seen in Acts 9; and even in Caesarea, as we saw in Acts 10! That my friends has been the story of the Jesus movement throughout the past 20 centuries around the world! *Jesus followers on the move taking the story of Jesus with them to wherever they go.* Sometimes it's intentional and we have historically called those people 'missionaries', but more often it is the result of **migration**. In fact, think about this: *if you live anywhere in the world except Jerusalem, and you have heard the story of Jesus, it's because someone traveled and brought Jesus' story to your part of the world.*

Acts 11:19 says: **"Now those who had been scattered by the persecution that broke out when Stephen was killed traveled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus and**

Antioch, telling the message only to Jews. Some of them, however, men from Cyprus and Cyrene, went to Antioch and began to speak to Greeks also, telling them the good news about the Lord Jesus. Dr. Luke, the author of Acts, wanted us to understand that God was doing something very strategic GEOGRAPHICALLY in this persecution driven scattering of Jesus followers.

"***Phoenicia***" is the area of Lebanon today and of course "***Cyprus***" is the island in the Mediterranean Sea west of Israel. "***Antioch***" was a great city in Syria. ***So that would describe migration north, west and east.*** But you see the painful words which described the powerful prejudice of that day: "***telling the message only to Jews.***" As we've seen in recent days, the conviction that the story and message of Jesus was ONLY intended by God for Jewish people, was widely held among the Jews.

But did you notice the courageous statement of exception: "***Some of them however, men from Cyprus and Cyrene, went to Antioch and began to speak to Greeks also, telling them the good news about the Lord Jesus!***" Now we can call them 'pioneers' or 'mavericks' or 'nonconformists' or 'rebels' or maybe we could call these men '***God ordained, God commissioned, God empowered, God guided courageous missionaries!***' Who were these men and where did they come from, bringing the message of Jesus to Greeks in Syrian Antioch? We know of one such courageous man from Cyprus named Barnabas, remember him? But Cyrene? Where is that?

In Acts 2:10, as part of the description of the Holy Spirit miracle of Pentecost, one of the languages spoken that day by the apostles was recognized by Pentecost Jewish pilgrims from "***parts of Libya near Cyrene.***" And do you remember when Jesus was forced to carry His cross through the streets of Jerusalem toward the crucifixion site on Golgotha hill, Matthew tells us: "***As they were going, they met a man from Cyrene, named Simon, and they [soldiers] forced him to carry the cross (for Jesus).***" (Matt. 27:32)

Cyrene was a city in modern day Libya, North Africa! 300 years before Jesus was born, after the death of Alexander the Great, a persecution broke out against Jews and there was a ***mass migration*** from Israel to Libya and in particular the city of Cyrene! At that same time, other Jews migrated to Egypt and other African nations including Ethiopia. Remember the Ethiopian official Philip met in Acts 8:27? Friends, this helps us see again the remarkable strategy of God in spreading the message of Jesus to the world, through the Pentecost miracle since Jewish pilgrims had come from all over the known world, and when they returned home, they took the story of Jesus with them! But also, God spread the news of Jesus through the persecution of Jewish Christians which caused a great migration out from Jerusalem in all directions. ***Isn't God amazing in how HE accomplishes His purposes?***

The record gives us a glimpse of the amazing things which were happening in Syrian Antioch through the courage of these Jewish Jesus followers from Cyprus and Cyrene who courageously told the story of Jesus to Greeks: "***The Lord's hand was***

with them and a great number of people believed and turned to the Lord Jesus."

(Acts 11:21) Historians tell us Antioch was one of the most multiethnic, multicultural cities in the world in the early first century. It was a major trade crossroads as caravans moved east and west from India all the way to Europe and from Africa north and south to Turkey and Central Asia.

People involved in the exciting Jesus movement in Antioch had the opportunity every day to share the story of Jesus with hundreds of people on the move as part of these trade caravans. Now think about that for a moment friends. Today we rely on technology to spread news, but in those days, it was face to face, and these traveling caravans not only were vital to the world economy, they were vital to the global news network! *God was spreading the news of Jesus, from multicultural Antioch, thanks to courageous Jesus followers who refused to be restricted by prejudice or traditions!* Oh, my I praise God for these **"some of them"**.

As we close today, let's just find a shady spot in very busy Antioch, and watch all the activity of business and travelers and eavesdrop on some of the conversations as visitors to Antioch hear, for the first time, about Jesus. Tomorrow we'll see that something very dramatic happened in Antioch in those days! For today, look around your city. How is news most effectively spread where you live, especially really important news like the possibility of a relationship with God now and eternal life in His presence after death? What strategy is God using today in continuing to spread news of Jesus in your part of the world in 2022? And what's your part in that my friend? Do you see evidence of the Lord's hand at work in your city and are great numbers of people coming to know Jesus where you live as they were in Syrian Antioch?

Now think about that my friends as we listen to a familiar song sung by Filipino men! I wonder who first took the story of Jesus to Cebu City?

Today's Scripture is Acts 11:19-21.