

How to Prepare for Hard Times

Acts 11:19-30

How would you respond if you knew that a disaster would happen soon?

Or just for the sake of discussion, let's say you could be certain that a disaster would occur within eighteen months.

What would you do?

How would we prepare?

What if you did not have all the resources you have today? For instance, what if you had been put out of your home?

What if you had to leave your familiar surroundings? How would we prepare for a disaster and help others to do the same?

Today's text of Scripture gives us an example to answer these questions. Let's begin with the end in mind in mind in verse 29: **"Then the disciples, every man according to his ability, determined to send relief unto the brethren which dwelled in Judea:"** This verse tells us about disaster relief efforts.

This text is sandwiched between two serious crises. When the disciples became aware of an impending disaster, disciples used their resources to send help. We will return to this verse in a moment, but for now, we are presented with a question: *Where did those dynamic disciples come from?* Now let's walk through the text to find out.

In Hard Times

Acts chapter 7 records the final sermon of Stephen. He began his message with the words, **"the God of glory!"**

And he concluded with his glorious vision of the Son of Man (Jesus Christ) standing at the right hand of God the Father. The Jewish leaders were so incensed that they rose up and killed him with heavy stones. Acts chapter 8 begins with the report that a great persecution began which scattered believers all over the region. The chief persecutor was a man named Saul.

Acts 9 tells the story of Saul's conversion; he later became the Apostle Paul. Acts 10 reports what has been called "the Gentile Pentecost;" Peter proclaimed the gospel in

Caesarea to the Gentiles gathered there, and they were gloriously saved. The ministry of the Gospel of grace surpassed ethnic boundaries and distinctions.

The first part of Acts 11 records how all of this was explained to the Jewish Christian leaders. Their conclusion according to Acts 11:18 was this: **“When they heard these things, they held their peace, and glorified God, saying, then hath God also to the Gentiles granted repentance unto life.”** What should we conclude from this summary of Acts 7-11? God’s glory was foremost in the minds of His people. They were willing to sacrifice their lives to proclaim God’s glorious Word. Even when they were heavily persecuted or feared being misunderstood, they continued to share the Gospel.

¹⁹ Now they which were scattered abroad upon the persecution that arose about Stephen travelled as far as Phoenicia, and Cyprus, and Antioch, preaching the word to none but unto the Jews only. ²⁰ And some of them were men of Cyprus and Cyrene, which, when they were come to Antioch, spoke unto the Grecians, preaching the Lord Jesus. ²¹ And the hand of the Lord was with them: and a great number believed, and turned unto the Lord.

Now remember, we are asking the question: *Where did those dynamic disciples (in verse 29) come from?* Verses 19 and 20 give us some idea of how far the persecuted believers traveled. And everywhere they went, they were preaching the Word.

When a virus is spreading, epidemiologists speak of “community spread.” Well this was the “community spread” – of the Gospel! According to Dr. Luke’s account, the men who preached at Antioch were from the island of Cyprus and from Cyrene (in Africa). But it’s important to note that the hand of the Lord was upon them. This is what we desperately need in these days: a new determination to preach the Word and to assure that the hand of the Lord is upon us.

Study what happened when the hand of the Lord was upon His messengers. (See notes below!:) What does this mean? It means that they were filled with the Holy Spirit; they were yielded to the Holy Spirit. Would you pray that God’s hand would be upon His servants? Pray that the Lord would break them and mold them to make them useful in proclaiming God’s Word. A great number believed. What does that mean? They **“turned to the Lord.”** This is exactly what the faithful preaching and teaching of God’s Word accomplishes according to 2 Timothy 3:16-17. Doctrinal teaching shows us what is right; earnest reproof shows us what is wrong; careful correction shows us how to

make things right (by turning to the Lord); Biblical instruction shows us how to keep things right. What was the result? Many turned to the Lord. When people see the glory of God, they see their rebellion in all its ugliness. And they turn to Christ who paid the penalty for their rebellion. What should we conclude?

1. Dynamic disciples are produced by the Spirit-filled preaching of the Gospel of God's Grace. 19-21

Now consider verses 22-24:

²² Then tidings (news) of these things came unto the ears of the church which was in Jerusalem: and they sent forth Barnabas that he should go as far as Antioch.

²³ Who, when he came, and had seen the grace of God, was glad, and exhorted them all, that with purpose of heart they would cleave unto the Lord. ²⁴ For he was a good man, and full of the Holy Spirit and of faith: and much people was added unto the Lord.

The Christian leaders at Jerusalem heard about the work of God in Antioch. So they sent a man named Joseph, whom the apostles nicknamed "Barnabas" (see Acts 4:36). He was from Cyprus, and may have been acquainted with those preachers from Cyprus. What was Barnabas like, and how did he approach the believers when he arrived in Antioch? And what happened then?

- Barnabas saw the grace of God. What would that look like? (See notes below.ⁱⁱ)
- Barnabas was glad! (He was overjoyed to see God's work.)
- Barnabas exhorted (encouraged) them all to hold fast to the Lord with purpose of heart.
- Barnabas was a good man: full of the Holy Spirit and faith.
- Many people were converted to the Lord!

So how are dynamic disciples produced?

2. Dynamic disciples are produced by encouraging others. We must encourage them to follow the Lord with purpose of heart. 22-24

Barnabas saw the remarkable grace of God in the lives of those people. And he built on that foundation by exhorting them all to keep holding on to the Lord firmly. But then, Barnabas did something that was highly unusual: he left the city. Why would he do that? Read verses 25-26.

²⁵ Then departed Barnabas to Tarsus, for to seek Saul: ²⁶ And when he had found him, he brought him unto Antioch. And it came to pass, that a whole year they assembled themselves with the church, and taught much people. And the disciples were called Christians first in Antioch.

Barnabas saw a need, and he moved to find a solution. He realized that the believers at Antioch needed Biblical teaching. Many of them were Grecians who had little to no understanding of the Old Testament. They did not know the prophecies of the Old Testament, especially those pertaining to Christ. They needed to be acquainted with the principles and promises of God's Word.

So Barnabas went to find an Old Testament teacher; he went looking for Saul and he found him at Tarsus. Then, the two of them met with the assembled church at Antioch. They taught the Scriptures for an entire year. And make no mistake, the results were of historic proportions: **"the disciples were called Christians first at Antioch."** When you ask the question: *"What is a Christian?"* be sure to use verse 26 as part of your answer. It was the disciples who were first called, "Christians." How were these dynamic disciples produced?

3. Dynamic disciples are produced by the faithful teaching of God's Word. 25-26

Now we have a better understanding of where dynamic disciples come from. They are produced by the Spirit-filled preaching of God's Word. They are produced by the encouragement to continue to follow the Lord with purpose of heart. They are produced by the faithful teaching of God's Word.

Now we began our study with questions: *How would you respond if you knew that a disaster would happen soon? What would we do? How would we prepare? What if you did not have all the resources you have today? For instance, what if you had been put out of your home? What if you had to leave your familiar surroundings? How would we prepare for a disaster and help others to do the same?* Those persecuted believers who spread out from Jerusalem showed us how to answer these questions.

In Anticipation of Hard Times

²⁷ And in these days came prophets from Jerusalem unto Antioch. ²⁸ And there stood up one of them named Agabus, and signified by the spirit that there should be great dearth [famine] throughout all the world: which came to pass in the days of Claudius Caesar. ²⁹ Then the disciples, every man according to his ability, determined to send relief unto the brethren which dwelt in Judaea: ³⁰ Which also they did, and sent it to the elders by the hands of Barnabas and Saul.

A prophet from Jerusalem journeyed to Antioch to announce a message from the Lord. The message was this: a worldwide famine was coming. (Historians tell us that this famine occurred in 46-47 A.D., during the reign of Claudius Caesar in Rome.)

So, here's the question for all of us. What if we knew that a disaster was coming – a year or two away? What would we do? The answer from this text is that we would preach and teach God's Word. We would encourage each other as disciples to hold on to our faith in the Lord. Then, we would trust that those dynamic disciples will know how to respond in crises.

Now here is the exciting part: we have been doing this at Calvary for years! Our folks love the preaching and teaching of the Scriptures. We've encouraged each other to be faithful. We are disciples. How will we respond to a disaster?

In one sense, the purpose of the church is not disaster relief. But in another sense, it is. How can this be? **“Then the disciples, every man according to his ability, determined to send relief unto the brethren which dwelled in Judea, which they also did and sent it to the elders [pastors] by the hands of Barnabas and Saul.”**

- The disciples acted as individuals – each according to his ability (and resources)
- The disciples determined together (apparently by a church vote) to send relief resources
- The disciples together determined to whom they would send these resources. Remember, this would be a worldwide famine. If everywhere you looked in the world there would be a famine, what would you decide to do? To whom would you send relief and why?

Disaster relief is not the purpose of the church. But it is the outgrowth of making disciples. They knew how to respond.

The disciples apparently reasoned along these lines:

- ✚ **There is a disaster that is worth than physical death – hell and the lake of fire.** (This is what Jesus was implying when people asked Him about the disasters in Luke 13:1-4. All of these disasters should bring men’s minds to think about their eternal destinies.)

- ✚ **There is an important answer to the disaster that is worse than physical death – the Gospel of Jesus Christ.** This is the message of the Son of God who left heaven on a disaster relief mission. Jesus Christ came to earth to suffer through the disaster that we all deserve.

- ✚ On the cross, Jesus suffered the wrath of God as your Substitute and mine. He died the sinner’s death that each of us deserved. As the infinite Son of God, He suffered the infinite justice that should have been poured out upon each of us. Jesus lived the perfect life that we should have lived. Jesus died the horrible death we should have died. Jesus rose again to new life – as will each person who trusts in Him for eternal salvation.

- ✚ **There are wonderful disciples who have suffered greatly already – how can we help them get through the next disaster?** This is a classic study in disaster relief protocol. These dynamic disciples could not help everyone on earth. They couldn’t help every Christian on earth. Whom should they help? They were very much aware of the great persecution that had come on fellow believers in Judea. But they also knew that those believers would share the Gospel answers about the ultimate disaster – hell and the lake of fire. And that’s where they chose to concentrate their efforts. Undoubtedly, these disciples also prepared to help those in their own region, but they wanted to enable the disciples of Judea to preach and teach the Word.

Now we know how to prepare for hard times. We know how to be like our Lord. In His strength, we know how to respond to any disasters that may come. The preaching and teaching of God’s Word, along with faithful encouragement, will produce dynamic

disciples. And those disciples will know how to help people get through disasters – even worldwide disasters.

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ⁱ Elijah: 1 Kings 18:46, Ezra: Ezra 7:6, 28, Nehemiah: Nehemiah 2:8, 18, Psalm 118:15-16, Ezekiel: Ezekiel 3:14, 8:1, 33:22, 37:1, 40:1, John the Baptist: Luke 1:66. This list makes the reference in Acts 11:21 all the more remarkable. The powerful hand of the Lord was upon the believers far and wide – not in a miraculous fashion, nor for special revelation. The hand of the Lord was upon them to preach the Word of God with power. Note the connection between 1 Thessalonians 1:5 and 1:8.

ⁱⁱ Study the Savior, John 1:14, The saints' behavior: Acts 20:32, Ephesians 4:7, 29, Philippians 1:7, Colossians 3:16