

Acts Series Part 31

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[0 : 00] There are matters of contemporary significance and importance that we would perhaps wish belong to the past.

I was struck recently by the KidZone pirate party that was held here in Bon Accord ten days ago, and let me stress, it went very well, and I commend those who participated and made it go so well. And yet, I was just pondering on how, when we think of pirates, we tend to think of them as a bit of fun. And the reason we think of them as a bit of fun, because we think of something that was a long-forgotten reality, not something for today.

And yet, in the light of incidents over these past few years off the coast of Somalia, where real-life modern-day pirates hold hostage, even as we gather here this evening, innocent victims, and lives are lost, and great suffering is endured because of real-life modern-day pirates.

You just wonder how appropriate it is to hold on to this idea of pirates as being a bit of fun. Another modern-day reality that we wish were not so is the reality of famine, and of many threatened with death simply because they don't have enough to eat.

[1 : 43] things. Those who explore and who study these matters tell us that even in this year that has begun, 2010, the prospects for nations in West Africa, North West Africa, known as the Sahel Belt, Niger, Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, and parts of northern Nigeria, that prospects for many there are very grim, or very difficult and alarming.

It's thought that maybe as many as half the population of Niger face the possibility of famine in this year that has begun. Again, those who know about these things tell us that with the investment of roughly 220 million dollars, the problem could be averted in that particular country, in Niger.

Just to put that in context, that's the equivalent of about 12 hours military spending in Iraq and Afghanistan by the U.S. and U.K. military.

So famine is, tragically and sadly, a live and current issue that ought to concern us. And our passage this evening concerns the subject of famine.

And I want us to read together in Acts chapter 11, and we'll read the final four verses of the chapter, verses 27 to 30.

[3 : 20] Acts chapter 11, the concluding verses of the chapter from verse 27. Last week we were considering the language that's used in the chapter to describe what is involved in becoming or being a Christian.

And we did that through the beginning of the chapter and then into the closing part of the chapter where we find ourselves in Antioch. And we noticed how it was in Antioch that the disciples were first called Christians.

Well, the account continues and tells us of a seemingly not particularly transcendental incident there in Antioch.

And it's that that we want to consider this evening. So let's read from verse 27. During this time, some prophets came down from Jerusalem to Antioch.

One of them, named Agabus, stood up and through the Spirit predicted that a severe famine would spread over the entire Roman world. This happened during the reign of Claudius.

[4 : 27] The disciples, each according to his ability, decided to provide help for the brothers living in Judea. This they did, sending their gift to the elders by Barnabas and Saul.

So these verses relate this incident where this prophet named Agabus predicts a famine that we're told did in fact occur.

And we're told the manner in which the disciples in Antioch respond to this news. I want to consider the subject, the passage, indeed, from two perspectives.

First of all, to consider famine in relation to God. What can we say about famine in relation to God? But then secondly, what can we say about famine in relation to God's people, in relation to the disciples of Jesus, as the disciples there in Antioch had to face up with this reality and respond to it. And just to set out a little bit the structure of what we're going to be saying this evening, what we'll be doing is, as regard to the subject matter of famine in relation to God, we will make the point that God knows, that God purposes, and that God cares.

[5 : 50] And then the subject matter of famine in relation to God's people, or the disciples. Notice how they discover about the famine.

They determine to help, and then they act. So that's a little bit of the structure that we're going to be going through this evening. Before we do that, just a very brief moment to locate ourselves in the historical context of this passage.

The passage, as we're told, relates to occurrences in the reign of the Emperor Claudius. Now, the Emperor Claudius reigned from A.D. 41 to A.D. 54.

And if the account in Acts is chronological, as it generally is, though not always, but if it is chronological in this part of Acts, then this prophecy occurs before the death of Herod.

You'll notice there in chapter 12 that one of the sections is entitled Herod's death. So if, as would seem reasonable, this prophecy that is made reference to at the end of chapter 11 occurred before the death of Herod, that helps us locate it historically as being before A.D. 44, which is when Herod died.

[7 : 14] And that's something that we know from different sources. So Agabus prophesies concerning this famine in the reign of Claudius, but the prophecy itself is before A.D. 44.

Now, as to famine during the reign of Claudius, there is a great deal of external attestation to many famines during his reign, these 13 or 14 years of his reign.

It seems difficult to identify one that was particularly significant over and above all the others, and yet throughout his reign there were various famines.

And the one that would seem to most likely be referred to here in the prophecy of Agabus, as it was one that particularly affected Judea, took place between A.D. 45 and A.D. 47.

Now, the other piece of the historical jigsaw, if you wish, is to try and establish when the visit that is referred to took place, which may have been immediately on hearing the news, as if we read the verses, that would seem to be the case.

[8 : 35] They hear about the famine, and they decide to help, and they send Barnabas and Saul. But, of course, that visit by Barnabas and Saul need not have been immediately on hearing the news.

Some time may well have elapsed. But as to that visit of Barnabas and Saul, while we can't state so categorically, it would seem to be the visit that is made reference to in Galatians 2 that we've read, where Paul speaks of how 14 years after his conversion, together with Barnabas, he went to Jerusalem.

And you'll have noticed in that passage that there is a specific reference to helping the poor, how the leaders in Jerusalem commend Paul and Barnabas and ask them to continue remembering the poor.

And so there's a number of, if you wish, coincidences that would suggest that the visit referred to in Galatians 2 is the one that's made reference to here in Acts 11.

And because the visit in Galatians 2 has a clear time reference, 14 years after my conversion, that visit was in A.D. 47. So I hope I haven't lost you yet with all these numbers.

[9 : 47] But more or less, the picture that's emerging is that this prophecy, it was before the death of Herod, so it must have been before A.D. 44, and yet the visit would seem to have been in A.D. 47.

Now, as I say, at first sight that seems a difficulty. It seems an awful long time between the prophecy and the visit. But then, after all, it is a prophecy. It's prophesying something that is going to happen in the future.

And so it's maybe not that unreasonable that a significant amount of time could have passed between discovering what is going to happen, and the collection being made, and the visit where the funds raised are taken to Jerusalem.

Well, it's not of great importance to have in mind and have clearly in mind all the ins and outs of the historical details or the years in which these things may or may not have taken place.

But it's maybe just helpful to have that brief survey. But let's move on to what is our main concern, which is to consider the subject matter of famine in these two ways that I've already indicated.

[11:01] First of all, from God's perspective, famine in relation to God. First thing that we want to say is this, that God knows. Now, in many ways this is such an obvious thing to say, and yet it's worth stressing.

The passage that we've read, these final verses of chapter 11 of Acts, relates the arrival of these prophets from Jerusalem. Some prophets came down from Jerusalem to Antioch, and among them there was one named Agabus.

And he, as we've read, stood up and through the Spirit predicted that a severe famine would spread over the entire Roman world. How did he know?

How did Agabus know that there was going to be this famine? The answer, as I'm sure you would all agree, is a very simple one. He was able to predict this famine through the Holy Spirit.

We're told explicitly, through the Spirit predicted that a severe famine would spread over the entire Roman world. The Holy Spirit of God is the one who was speaking through Agabus.

[12:13] The Holy Spirit, the third person of the Trinity, God himself spoke through Agabus. And so God knows about this famine that is going to afflict parts of the Roman world, or indeed, as it suggested, spread over the entire Roman world.

And, of course, nothing has changed. Two thousand years may have passed, but it remains true that there is no famine, no earthquake, no natural disaster of any kind, no tragedy at the personal level in our own individual lives, no illness, no cancer, no heart attack.

None of these things catch God by surprise. None of these things are unknown to God. God knows. The good things and the bad things are all known by God.

And here, this particular famine is known to God, and God chooses to make known and to share His knowledge for reasons that we're going to consider in a moment, share this knowledge with His people in Antioch.

So the first thing to say is that God knows. But the second thing to say is that God purposes. We don't know the reasons for the famine, or indeed for the famines, during the reign of Claudius.

[13:38] It's possible that when Agabus predicts this severe famine spreading over the entire Roman world, what we're to understand is how these several famines together constitute this great famine spreading, even if technically those who study these things will say, well, these were different famines.

But it seems reasonable that in the context of this prophecy, perhaps that's what's being suggested. All of these different famines that there were together constituting one great severe famine. And the point is that we don't know the reasons for these famines.

It's possible that it was the result of several bad harvests, as a result of drought in different parts of the empire.

Of course, we know that bad harvests and drought in and of themselves don't necessarily then result in famine. If there is good and wise planning, as was the case in days of old and the days of Joseph, then even several years of drought do not necessarily then lead to a famine.

In fact, as I was reading a little bit about the prospect of famine in North Africa, Northwest Africa, even in this year, one of the officials involved in these matters stated the following, if we work fast enough, early enough, it will not be a famine.

[15:04] If we don't move, there is a strong risk it could be happening. So in terms of the causes of famine, yes, there may well have been drought, there may well have been poor harvests, but then perhaps also there was a great deal of human culpability and responsibility in allowing that to then proceed to a famine where people are dying through lack of food.

And we have to recognize that even if we don't know the causes of this particular famine, we have to recognize because it's before us and it would be impossible to do otherwise, that in a fallen world, the fallen world that we live in, bad things happen.

Very bad and tragic things happen. And that while God is not morally responsible for these bad things, neither is He impotent in the face of a tragedy.

Our God, far from being an impotent observer from afar, is a God who fulfills His good purposes in the midst of and indeed through tragedy.

And in the case of this famine, this is what we find, this is what we discover. This famine that is predicted by Agabus had certainly two clear purposes.

[16:27] It maybe had many other purposes that we are not privy to, but two very clear purposes in this famine. One of them was that it provided a very important and crucial opportunity for the cementing of the unity between the Gentile Christians and the Jewish Christians in one church of Jesus Christ, across ethnic and religious and geographic barriers.

This famine, tragic though it was, provided this important opportunity for the Christians in Antioch who had received the word from Jerusalem.

The Christians from Jerusalem, as we've read, had gone down to Antioch and had ministered the word to them. And now they, as a result of this famine, are able to minister to those who had come to them.

And so together this relationship is cemented. We know the concerns that there were, the fears that there were, the doubts that there were about this whole matter of Gentiles being part of the church. And yet this famine, tragic though it was, provided in God's purposes an opportunity for the church to be united, for that unity to be cemented.

[17:40] It also provided for this nascent Christian community in Antioch an opportunity to recognize that as believers and as a church, their responsibility was not only the ministry of the word, but ministry indeed.

That it was at the heart of who they were as Christians to provide for those in physical and material need. Not as some extra or some afterthought, but at the very heart of their identity.

And so here at the very beginnings of the church, this tragedy provides the opportunity for it to be impressed upon them, how important it is for them as Christians, and because they're Christians, to help and to provide for those in physical and in material need.

So God purposes. Even in this tragedy, even in this famine, God has His purposes. Now this is a difficult thing, and it's understandable that some may protest.

Some might say, well, so much suffering required that these good purposes be fulfilled. Could there not have been a better way to achieve the same end result?

[18:59] And what can we say to these understandable and, in a measure, legitimate concerns? Well, one thing we would say, and something we've hinted at already, is that while we've identified two very clear purposes that were fulfilled through the famine, there may have been a multiplicity of other purposes that God has not chosen to reveal to us.

Great purposes are very small purposes in individual lives that God was fulfilling through this famine. We don't know, but it's not unreasonable to imagine that God was doing a great deal more than what we are privy to.

But it's also true in response to the concern that how is it that God would fulfill His purposes in these ways? It's also true, and it's also right, that we should, with the prophet of old, recognize that who are we as clay to protest to the potter, why have you made me thus?

God works as He sees fit, and it is right that we should humbly bow down to His way of working, even when we may find it difficult to understand, or perhaps especially when we find it difficult to understand.

So first of all, in terms of God and famine, God knows, God purposes, but thirdly, God cares. The fact that God knows, the fact that God fulfills His purposes through tragedy, through this disaster of famine, should not lead us to think of God as a distant, omnipotent, indifferent to the pain of those who suffer.

[20:46] For this very incident, the very reason that God shares His knowledge with the church at Antioch through the prophet Agabus, the very reason He does that is precisely because He's concerned that provision be made for those who will suffer when the famine strikes.

It is His care, it is His concern, that the believers in particular, though not, I'm sure, exclusively the believers, but the believers in particular, in Judea be provided for.

It is for that reason that He makes this situation known to the church at Antioch. That is evidence of His care and of His compassion for those in need, or those who will be soon in need.

So God cares. God seeks to provide for those in need. And He uses means for that. What means does He use? Well, in this case, and this continues to be so, He uses His own people.

The church at Antioch, this new church, this young church, this nascent church, so much to learn, and yet this is the church that God chooses to use to meet this very real need and to supply and to alleviate the suffering of the believers in Judea.

[22 : 07] And of course, nothing has changed. God still uses His people. He uses us. He uses His church that we might be the means of giving concrete expression to the compassion that He has, to the care that He has for those who suffer, for those who are hungry, for those who are the victims of disaster and tragedy, of one kind or another.

So God knows. God purposes. God cares. But what of God's people? What of the disciples? The passage also speaks concerning the disciples. The first thing that we've already suggested that the disciples do, and we can pass over this very quickly because it's a very obvious one, is that the disciples discover that there is to be this famine.

They hear the prophecy of Agabus. They believe that it is indeed the Word of God. And this discovery, this knowledge that they now have immediately, whether they like it or not, carries with it responsibility.

If they had not known, then they could not have been accused of heartless, for not doing anything. But now they do know. And they alone know. The Claudius doesn't know.

And the powers that be don't know. But the Christians at Antioch know because they've been told by this prophecy. And so they need to do something about it.

[23 : 31] This knowledge brings with it responsibility. God continues to make known to His people the needs that there are in this world.

In this day of instant communication, we discover very quickly where there is a tragedy, an earthquake, a famine, where there is need of one kind or another.

Ignorance does not provide us with any kind of excuse, for we know the problems and the needs that there are. And for us, too, that knowledge brings responsibility.

It's not necessary for a prophet to come and tell us. And only then are we responsible. No.

Whatever the means whereby we discover these things, that carries responsibility.

Which leads us on to the second, more substantive point. And it is this concerning the disciples.

And it is that the disciples determined to help. We read there in verse 29, the disciples, each according to his ability, decided to provide help for the brothers living in Judea.

[24 : 40] While the decision-making process, if you wish, is not explicitly outlined, it seems to suggest some kind of congregational meeting where all are able to make known their thoughts.

Maybe it was on the very occasion that the prophet made this prophecy. We don't know. And they decide to do something about it. The disciples. We're not told that Saul and Barnabas or the leaders.

No, the disciples, the Christians, decide to do something. They want to do something. They think it's necessary and important to do something. They determine to help.

And we can notice in this decision three distinct principles regarding the manner that they are to help. The first principle that we discover here in this brief passage is one, the principle that their concern is in the first place for others before themselves.

You'll notice that the prophecy says that there's going to be a severe famine spread over the entire Roman world. Now, that includes Antioch. So, you could have imagined the believers in Antioch saying, well, that's good to know.

[25 : 55] It's good that we've been given advance warning that there's going to be a famine over the whole of the empire. We're part of the empire. We're going to be affected. Well, let's have a collection to put aside something for a rainy day so that when that famine comes we won't be affected.

That would have seemed a reasonable and prudent thing to do. But their first concern isn't for themselves even though they potentially could also be affected by this famine. They say, no, there are others in greater need.

Our concern is to help others. And so, this first principle, Christian principle of giving, of helping those in need, the concern for others before a concern for ourselves.

That's a very applicable lesson for us today. We know that, and you hear it on the news, especially in these last couple of years with the economic downturn and the recession and all, that we hear of these things.

and we hear of charities and mission agencies floundering through lack of resources because, well, we're all affected now and so we can't afford to help others.

[27 : 00] We have to look after number one. We have to look after our own. We no longer can give ourselves the luxury of helping others. And you hear that at the level of the political discourse in our

country and people say, oh, well, in hard times we can't be thinking about aid and helping poor countries.

What about ourselves? Well, the Christian principle we find here is that the Christians in Antioch don't think about themselves. They think about those, no doubt, and perhaps for a number of circumstances that we won't go into in greater need in Judea.

So that's one principle we notice here. But also we notice a second principle in terms of their decision to help, and that is the priority of helping the brothers. The famine knows of no distinction. Famine doesn't select between Christians and those who aren't Christians. No doubt this famine would affect it all equally. Perhaps the wealthy could have shielded themselves from the effects of the famine, but in terms of religious identity there would have been no distinction.

And yet it is the particular concern of the Christians in Antioch that provision be made for the brothers in Judea. for their brothers and sisters in Christ, the Jewish believers in Jerusalem.

[28 : 18] That was their primary or their principal concern. Not, we would stress, an exclusive concern, though nothing is stated explicitly of a concern that's beyond that.

But in the light of the whole of the teaching of Scripture, we can draw out this principle that there is and there should be a right and proper priority for those of the family of the faith.

and it's good for us to consider how that finds expression in our own giving to those in need. But then a third principle very quickly to notice in this determination to help is the principle that each gave according to their ability.

There in verse 29, the disciples each according to his ability. The giving involves, it would seem, all of the believers each gave from the richest to the poorest. They all contributed.

They were all involved. Nobody said, well, I'm too poor or I don't have enough. No, each gave. But it was according to their ability. It was voluntary. It wasn't obligatory.

[29 : 20] Nobody had to give. There wasn't a quota established that all had to give whether they were able or not, whether they were willing or not. All gave, but it was voluntary. It was equitable.

It was according to their ability. And that remains a principle that applies to our giving as Christians and particularly special giving at times of need that are brought to our attention.

So, the disciples discover the problem. They decide to help and finally, the disciples act. We read in verse 30, this they did. Now, this may seem painfully obvious and self-evident because, of course, they act.

They've decided to. They want to. Of course, they take it to its conclusion and actually doing it. But it's interesting that even in the manner in which they act, there are some principles that can be noted with regard to the practicalities or the logistics of giving to those in need.

And we'll just run through these very quickly. First of all, they're careful to ensure that the funds reach the destination. This they did, sending their gifts to the elders by Barnabas and Saul.

[30 : 34] They're very careful to ensure that the funds raised reach those in need. Now, that seems a very obvious thing. And yet, we've heard even in these days, some of you may have noticed in the news of how funds raised, very substantial funds raised for precisely those parts of Africa we've been referring to, Sudan and Somalia.

I think it was specifically Sudan, how these funds had been diverted for the purchase of arms. Now, these weren't funds raised by Christian agencies particularly, but this issue of ensuring that the funds provided reach their destination, that's something we should be concerned about.

They also, notice, sent a delegation of two to take the gift. From the passage in Galatians, it would seem that maybe Titus also accompanied them, but the official delegation, as it were, was made up of Saul and Barnabas.

Why two? You might say, well, why two? You know, how long is a piece of string? You could maybe give lots of answers to that. Seems sensible for people to go. Accompany.

They just needed to accompany one with another. Well, perhaps, an element of safety. A long journey such as this, 300 miles or more, to go together or accompanied seems sensible, seems prudent.

[31 : 52] Protection from theft. They're carrying a significant amount of money. And so, if there's two of them, then they can protect that in a better way.

But I wonder, and I just suggest that the protection that lies behind sending both Barnabas and Saul together, I wonder if the protection is not only from theft, but also protection from temptation.

Nobody is above temptation. If they had sent one person, there would have been a temptation, this huge amount of money. And we can't say, oh, well, that's ridiculous. How could a Christian be tempted in such a way?

Well, many Christians are. Perhaps the two most common causes of Christian leaders falling are sex and money. Money and sex. They're the classics throughout history.

And even the likes of Saul and Barnabas are not above temptation as none of us are above temptation. So, the Christians in Antioch very wisely ensure that two go to protect them, perhaps from physical danger, but also perhaps, I would suggest, from temptation.

[32 : 59] And there's a principle there in terms of care being taken to not expose to temptation unnecessarily those who are responsible for the financial affairs of the church.

But then one final little detail we notice here is that this help that is sent is channeled through the leadership of the church in Jerusalem. This they did sending their gifts to the elders by Barnabas and Saul.

Now, we don't have time to explore a question that isn't of great importance but a curiosity. And it is this. Where are the deacons? It would seem that something of this nature would have been best entrusted to the deacons.

We've already noticed in Acts a few chapters back how deacons were elected though they're not given that name at that point. Why is this money not given to the deacons?

Well, it's not hugely important. It's just a curiosity, I suppose, that we can't explore this evening. The point is that there is a concern that the funds raised is channeled through the right and proper channels and particularly through the church.

[34 : 08] The church gives to the church. And you say, well, that's so obvious. And yet, so often in our giving in the Christian community, the worldwide Christian community today, we're reluctant to do that.

We want to do it through trustworthy individuals. And we bypass the church and we go through people that we know and like and are comfortable with. And yet here is a principle that unless there are very good reasons not to do so, we as Christians, if we want to help other Christians, well, God has established His church.

And it is through the church that rightly and properly help of this kind can be provided. So, some principles in terms of even the practicalities or the logistics of how the disciples act.

But in conclusion, the disciples also have to respond to this reality of famine. They know about it. They discover about it. They decide to help. And they act in support of the brethren in Judea.

And so for us, in the face of tragedy and suffering today, be it famines or earthquakes or whatever the cause, we can be sure that God knows, that God purposes, and that God cares.

[35 : 26] But equally, as such need is brought to our attention, let us be of those who determine to help and convert that determination into wise giving to those in need.

Let us pray.