

Acts 11

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[0 : 0 0] on our sheet. Rock of ages, cleft for me. Let me hide myself in thee. Let the water and the blood from my wounded side which flowed be of sin the double cure. Save from wrath and make me pure.

Rock of ages, cleft for me. Let's stand as we sing this hymn. Rock of ages, cleft for me. Let me hide myself in thee. Let the water and the blood from my wounded side which flowed be of sin the double cure.

Save from wrath and make me pure. Not the nature of my hands can fulfill my lost in hands.

Could my seal no rest I know? Could my tears forever flow? All my sin could not have known.

Thou was saved but thou alone. Nothing in thine hands I pray. Simply to thy cross I bring.

[1 : 4 4] Make it long to thee for dress. Help us learn to thee for grace. Bow right to the fountain fly. Wash me, Savior, or I die.

While I draw this fleeting prayer. When my eyes shall close in death. When I rise to worlds unknown.

Have behold thee on my throne. Rock of ages, cleft for me. Let me hide myself in thee.

Within a few months of arriving in Aberdeen back in 2008, we met a Syrian family.

The mother was working some oil related job. I can't remember exactly where. And the father, Ali was his name, would come to Little Lambs with their wee one.

[3 : 0 7] And so we got to know Ali a little bit. He was a journalist who had left Syria because of the opposition of the Assad regime.

And writings that he had authored that were not to their liking. And so they were here for that reason. Certainly that was one of the main reasons. I remember on one occasion I was trying to cast my mind back. I don't know if it was in 2008 or 2009.

But the family joined us for Christmas dinner. They've since moved from Aberdeen. But I remember at the time as I was speaking to Ali and hearing a little bit about his experience of Syria.

I remember thinking that in the grand scheme of things, that despite my new friend's difficulties, things weren't so bad in Syria. Syria was in those days, just six or seven years ago, almost a beacon of stability and certainly religious liberty in the Middle East.

And the Christian communities, relatively speaking, that would certainly be true or was true. The Christian communities there, ancient Christian communities enjoyed great freedom to worship and to live out their faith within their own communities.

[4 : 3 0] I was reading a 2010 edition of Operation World. Some of you may be familiar with Operation World. It's a guide to prayer for the world and it goes through country by country.

Well, the edition that I was looking at was in 2010. So just before really the current war in Syria began, certainly what was written about Syria would have been written before the war had begun.

And one of the suggestions for prayer in the light of subsequent events carries, I don't know, a dark irony to it.

Those reading this publication and being encouraged to pray for Syria were encouraged to pray in this direction. Pray that God might somehow use this nation to bring peace to the area, to the Middle East.

Well, you read that now and it just seems almost bizarre that you would pray in that way for Syria. I wonder what happened.

[5 : 40] Did we fail to pray or did God fail to answer or has God failed to answer? Well, today, Syria is a living or dying nightmare.

Only it's not a nightmare. It's a reality. I don't need to terrorize you with the accounts of the cruelties that those within those parts of Syria under the authority now of the Islamic State are suffering, be it Christian or other minorities.

You've heard and read the reports. We don't need to recount them this evening. And, of course, we also know of the abuses that Assad and his forces have been guilty of and continue to be guilty of.

Battle bombs and indiscriminate bombing and laying siege to neighborhoods and towns and cities with little, it would seem, concern for the civilian populations.

We know about that. We've seen all that. We've probably heard some of the numbers associated with the situation in Syria over these last four or five years.

[6 : 56] Some 200,000 people, and counting, of course, have lost their lives. Tens of thousands of them civilians. Of a population of about 22 million at the time that the war began, over half have been displaced.

Over 7 million internally within the borders of Syria and over 3 million, and very much, and counting, beyond its borders. Some of you may have seen, I just saw it on the BBC website today, that Archbishop Justin Welby was interviewed.

It may well have been in connection with Songs of Praise today. I'm not sure. I didn't see Songs of Praise. But what I read was that it was in the context of Songs of Praise. He was interviewed and asked about his response to the Paris attacks, attacks that we know can be traced to IS in Syria, in terms of the planning of it.

And Justin Welby was frank in sharing how he had prayed to God on the Saturday morning following the Paris attacks. And he prayed in this way, God, why?

Why is this happening? Where are you in all this? Where is God in all this? It's a good question.

[8 : 23] What can we as God's people do? Is there anything we can do? We look on and there is a real sense of powerlessness. What can I do?

What can we do? With the best intentions in the world, the situation is so complex, the issues are so difficult even to understand, never mind no, what we could possibly do in response that might be of some help.

What I want to do this evening is to consider references to Syria in the New Testament. And as we identify them, draw from those references truths that still apply and parallels that can, with care, be drawn.

And as we do that, I trust we can be in some measure encouraged and certainly challenged in the face of what we see in Syria today.

Now just a kind of a brief kind of geographic point to make about Syria, when we speak about Syria.

[9 : 37] It's actually the case that ancient Syria, certainly Syria in New Testament times and modern day Syria, though not exactly geographically equivalent, largely they are.

So when we read of Syria in New Testament, it's not that different to Syria today. As I say, it's not exactly the same. Modern day Lebanon would have been part of New Testament, Syria.

Also to the north of Syria, Turkey has encroached. Well, Turkey probably wouldn't describe it in that way, but Turkey now occupies part of what in the New Testament would have been known as Syria.

Interestingly, Antioch is one of the cities that now is in Turkey, but that was in Syria when we read of it in the book of Acts. The first reference that we have in the New Testament to Syria is in a surprising, perhaps, place.

And as we approach Christmas, well, let's turn to one of the narrative passages, or the birth narrative passages in Luke, Luke chapter 2 and verse 2.

[10 : 50] This is the first reference that we have to Syria in the New Testament. We read, we were so familiar with these words, and we'll hear them many times in the next few weeks. In those days, Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world.

This was the first census that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria. So, Luke, the historian, gives us this historical reference to ground the birth of Jesus in world history.

He speaks of Caesar Augustus, the emperor, of course, but then particularly of this character called Quirinius, who was, as we're told, governor of Syria.

Now, Quirinius, it would seem, was appointed governor of Syria in the year 7 BC. He would have been responsible for administering the census that is spoken of here in Luke chapter 2.

Presumably, that's why Luke thought it important to make specific reference to him. He was also responsible for another census that has been dated to the year 6 AD.

[12 : 08] Now, this is a, the second census is one that's more attested by other historical sources. The Jewish historian Josephus makes mention of that census. And that second census led to a Jewish rebellion that, again, curiously is mentioned in the book of Acts when Gamaliel is encouraging fellow Pharisees to be careful about not being too opposed to the Christians.

And he makes reference to the census. And he makes reference to this rebellion. And the reason for the rebellion was a second census that Quirinius was responsible for administering, obviously under orders from Rome.

So, the point is that these authorities, Caesar Augustus himself, who ultimately had power over and responsibility for the entire empire, including Syria, but not only him but then Quirinius, were authorities placed where they were placed by God.

But not only had they been placed by God, they were also directed by God. If we think even of this account here in Luke, Quirinius, under orders, of course, from Rome, organizes this census.

And in doing so, he unwittingly ensures that the birth of the Messiah, the birth of Jesus, is in Bethlehem, in fulfillment of prophecy.

[13 : 42] In Micah chapter 5 and verse 2, we read, But you, O Bethlehem, Ephrata, who are too little to be among the clans of Judah, from you shall come forth. For me, one who is to be ruler in Israel, whose coming forth is from old, from ancient days.

Of course, Quirinius, as he organized his census, had no notion that he was being used by God to ensure that prophecy was fulfilled. But he was an instrument of God.

And it has ever been so. And as we fast forward to today, it's no different today. It is as true today as it was in the time of Jesus, that as we read in Proverbs 21 and verse 1, Now, of course, it is true that it's easier for us to look back in history, especially when, in the case of biblical history, we're given a measure of interpretation of events, to look back and see how God used and directed pagan emperors and kings.

We can see it as we look back. It's more difficult in the present. We don't have the advantage of looking back at how things turned out or what resulted from the different actions that are now occurring.

But the fact that we can't see it so clearly doesn't make it any less the case. That as at the time that Jesus was born and Quirinius was governor of Syria, so today those who exercise authority, be it President Assad, are now given the way in which the society has disintegrated to such an extent, you'd have to identify others who exercise authority de facto in different parts of the country.

[15 : 38] God has not lost control over those who He has allowed and ensured occupy the places of authority in that land.

He is not approving of what they do. He's not responsible for what they do. But He is in control today as much as He ever has been. God is the one who places.

God is the one who directs. God is the one who removes those who are in authority. God is the one who removes the same. God is the one who removes the same. God, we can say, governs in Syria.

But a second reality that we can draw from New Testament references to Syria is that God's fame spreads in Syria. For that we turn to Matthew's Gospel.

Matthew's Gospel chapter 4 and verse 24. Matthew 4 and verse 24.

[16 : 47] What we have there really is a summary of Jesus' early ministry. We probably do well to just read from verse 23. And what do we read?

What does Matthew tell us as he summarizes the early ministry of Jesus? Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the good news of the kingdom, and healing every disease and sickness among the people.

That's all familiar to us. We would expect that kind of summary. But then there's something surprising. In verse 24 we read, News about Him, that is about Jesus, spread all over Syria.

And people brought to Him all who were ill with various diseases, those suffering severe pain, the demon possessed, and so on and so forth. So Matthew is giving us the summary of Jesus' early ministry, and then he states, as I say, in a surprising way to us, that news about Him or His fame spread, as that expression is translated in other versions, the ESV translate verse 24, His fame spread all over Syria.

Now what is being said here? Well, one way of understanding this, or one way of understanding what Matthew intends by speaking of Syria is to recognize that at the time of the Roman Empire, at the time of the New Testament, Syria was a province, one of the many provinces of the Roman Empire, and included in that province was Judea, of course Galilee as well.

[18 : 21] So Galilee, where Jesus was ministering, as we're told there in verse 23, was within the province of Syria. And so maybe simply at that level, Matthew identifies that region as Syria.

It's possible. Even if that's what he has in mind, it's, I think, striking that Matthew says that news about Him spread all over Syria. So not just within Syria, you might say, oh well, he's referring to that part of the province where Jesus was.

Galilee, and perhaps somewhat beyond that. No, he says all over Syria. However, it's more likely that Matthew, in this gospel that is the most Jewish of all the gospels, would only speak of Syria, as he does here, if he was referring to what we might call actual Syria, not the Roman province, which was an artificial construct that had included Judea.

It was nothing to do with Syria historically, but the Romans had, you know, bagged them all in together. When Matthew speaks of Syria, it's much more likely that he has in mind Syria.

He's not thinking of Galilee. He's not thinking of Judea. Now, if that's the case, and I think that's a reasonable conclusion to come to, it's a remarkable thing that Matthew is saying.

[19 : 39] And how so, how so that the fame of Jesus spread throughout Syria? Well, we can certainly conclude that the Syrians heard the good news.

One of the advantages of the Roman Empire, I don't know if people would necessarily see this as an advantage when we think of the current political debate about open borders and free movement of peoples, but it is the case that one of the realities of the Roman Empire that there was this free movement of peoples.

So there would no doubt have been many Syrians in Galilee. They border. It was a stone's throw from Galilee. Galilee was the most northern part of Israel.

And so no doubt many Syrians would have been in Galilee, and they would have heard Jesus as he preached. They would have witnessed and experienced his healing touch. Perhaps they were among those who brought others to Jesus.

There in verse 24, we're told news about him spread all over Syria, and people brought to him. And where were they brought from? Well, no doubt the villages of Galilee, but perhaps even from Syria.

[20 : 49] Those who had heard about him, they knew of a family member who needed to be healed, and even from Syria, they could bring their sick that Jesus would attend to them.

And of course, those who did hear about Jesus and experience Jesus in Galilee, and when they returned home, they would go, and they would tell others of what they had seen and heard.

I wonder if the seeds of the early New Testament Syrian church were sown by these early witnesses that Matthew alludes to in what he says here.

God's fame spreads in Syria. Well, what about today when we think of this beautiful expression, the fame of Jesus spreading throughout Syria, all of Syria?

Could it be that today, in such a seemingly God-forsaken country, that's the kind of language we would use when we were speaking of Syria, a God-forsaken country?

[21 : 55] Might not be the right way to speak about it, but it's the kind of way we might speak about it. Could it be that in such a country, today, the fame of Jesus might spread? Can we, can you and I, pray to this end?

We can pray for God's people in Syria today, seeking to spread his fame in desperately dangerous and trying circumstances. God's fame spreads in Syria.

But a third reality that we can identify in the New Testament concerning God and his relationship with Syria is that God protects his people in Syria.

And the starting point for that, really, and around the thoughts that I have that I want to revolve around, what we know, a familiar passage of Saul of Tarsus and his trip to Damascus in Acts chapter 9.

We read of Saul going to Damascus and we know what his intentions were. We can just remind ourselves in verse 2 of Acts chapter 9.

[23 : 06] We read there, well, let's read from verse 1. Meanwhile, Saul was still breathing out murderous threats against the Lord's disciples. He went to the high priest and asked him for letters to the synagogues in Damascus, of course, a Syrian city, so that if he found any there who belonged to the way, whether men or women, he might take them as prisoners to Jerusalem.

Damascus was a very significant city with a large Jewish population. There's reference here to synagogues in the plural. In fact, again, secular history, if that's the right way of describing it, or parallel history to biblical history, tells us that at the time of the Judean revolt in the year 66 A.D., there is a record of the massacre of 10,500 Damascus Jews.

Now, that gives you some idea of the scale of the Jewish population in Damascus if that number were massacred. Presumably not all of them were massacred. It's also just of anecdotal interest that when we think of Damascus, we're considering what is claimed to be, I think accurately, the oldest continuously inhabited city in the world, Damascus.

Before we comment on God's protection of his people in Syria in the context of Saul's visit or trip to Damascus, we can also just note the fact that there already were believers in Damascus.

When Saul is converted, he is able to then gather with the believers. There already was a Christian community in Damascus.

[24 : 52] I wonder why that was. How did that emerge? Maybe it goes back to what we saw in Matthew of the fame of Jesus spreading throughout Syria. It certainly seems likely that this nascent Christian community in Damascus may have been a result of what we read of in Acts chapter 11 and verse 19, though Damascus specifically isn't mentioned.

In Acts 11, 19, that's the passage we read, we read, now those who had been scattered by the persecution in connection with Stephen, which of course we know Saul was involved in, traveled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus, and Antioch, telling the message only to Jews.

And then it goes on. But Antioch was a Syrian city. Perhaps others made it to Damascus. We're not told, but it seems, if not likely, certainly we could describe it as possible.

But let's just notice three elements of God's protection in connection with Syria on the basis of what we have in front of us in the text. First of all, we can notice that, curiously, as we try and draw parallels for today, Syria was actually a place of refuge for those being persecuted in Jerusalem.

As a result of the persecution, they flee from Jerusalem to Antioch and no doubt elsewhere. So it was, in God's providence, at least for a time, a place of refuge.

[26 : 19] And what we see there, of course, is a pattern that repeats itself over history, how God uses the scattering of His people to protect His people. His people are often protected by their fleeing from persecution.

That then speaks of, or reminds us of the onus, that as they flee, there would be doors open for them to go through that they might be able to escape.

And that has a very important contemporary challenge for us. Where will those who flee go to? But we can also notice that God protected His people by means of miraculous intervention.

And I'm thinking of Saul himself as he makes his way with the intention of doing harm to God's people in Damascus. We have this encounter with the risen Jesus.

And he's brought to faith in a very dramatic way. And in this way, God protects those who would have been the victims of persecution had Saul not been so converted.

[27 : 26] We also notice in this account how God used His own people in Damascus to, in turn, provide protection for Saul. We're not going to look up all the passages, but if you remember, if you're familiar with the account, remember that the time came when Saul, having been converted, having begun to preach, he then was in danger from the Jews in Damascus.

And so, this small, nascent, believing community, they are used of God to allow Paul to facilitate Paul or Saul's escape.

And so, protection is provided by means of others doing what they can to help those in danger different ways in history. And today, God protects in different ways.

There is, of course, the ultimate protection of our eternal security as God's children. Even when believers do die as a result of persecution, as many have in Syria in these past months, even when that happens, it's not because they've fallen out with God's protecting hand.

They enjoy, as we all do, ultimate, eternal security. But God also does as He pleases and in accordance with His perfect will. He provides temporal protection and He uses means to protect His people.

[28 : 56] He can intervene miraculously. He can do it by means of bringing persecutors to faith. And our faith is small and we find it difficult to imagine.

Can you imagine when you see the pictures of these jihadists? It's difficult for us to conceive to imagine that they might become Christians. But of course, that's just our lack of faith, not because it can't happen.

Saul was brought to faith so they too can be brought to faith. He protects His people by scattering them to safety. There, of course, we have a responsibility as they're being scattered.

We think of Christians in particular, but of course, our concern should extend beyond fellow believers as those who are in danger or scattered. Who will provide protection?

Who will provide help to those who are being scattered? There's different ways we can do that. Different Christian organizations that we can support so that aid could be given and help provided to those who are being scattered.

[29 : 59] If there's one in particular I would commend to your consideration, the Barnabas Fund. they're very much involved in helping persecuted Christians and there's a very real focus, obviously, in these times on Syria and Iraq and there are different ways in which we can help simply in material ways by providing financial support.

And of course, we can pray. One of the ways in which we can be involved in God's protection of His people is as we pray. Let's just think about prayer for a moment.

Sometimes, when we see a problem as gargantuan, as Syria, we wonder, what possible impact could my prayers have? Really? Yes, of course, we know in theory that yes, they can have an impact but there's a kind of disconnect.

We think, do they really have an impact? They don't seem to be having an impact. You know, as I was thinking about this, I was reminded of maybe, you know, the caricature that you have of a participant in a beauty contest and they're asked, you know, what they most desire and, you know, the caricature is of this, forgive the expression, you know, dumb blonde or it could be a dog, it wouldn't have to be blonde but anyway, responding, oh, world peace.

You know, we smile and we say, well, that's just ridiculous. World peace, you know, that's not possible. But I wonder if there's something of that in us when it comes to prayer. Let's pray for peace in the Middle East.

[31 : 27] Well, yes, of course, we should pray for peace in the Middle East but it's not going to happen. I wonder, you know, can you relate to that? So, how do we pray?

Well, maybe we could begin by praying for seemingly small things. Maybe you could pray that the detonator switch on a suicide vest would malfunction.

Maybe you could pray that one of Assad's battle bombs would not land where civilians would be killed. Maybe you could pray that those aid packages that are sent to refugee camps and to the displaced would reach the neediest and indeed would multiply in their effect in helping those who are hungry.

Pray for the refugees crossing the Mediterranean that they would be protected from storms and would arrive safely to their destination regardless of what views we might have, whether it's a good thing or not, that it's even happening.

We can pray for these kind of things, small things, that God will hear and God will answer. We could go on, no doubt. In the matter of what we can do as instruments of God for the protection of God's people, be that in prayer or in providing material aid or giving refuge to those who are being scattered, we are conscious of how little seems possible.

[32 : 52] But as we're conscious of how little we can do, I was struck by words that I just read in the last day or two that were spoken by Mother Teresa.

And she says this about our minuscule efforts. And I quote, We know only too well that what we are doing is nothing more than a drop in the ocean. But if the drop were not there, the ocean would be missing something.

Now I'm not saying that's a profound biblical truth, but it's a striking thought. Certainly I found it striking how that drop in the ocean is not insignificant.

It can be used of God. It's necessary. The one final thing that I want to draw out from the New Testament references to Syria is this, that God builds His church in and from Syria.

Now we've already made reference to the presence of the church in Damascus. And in the book of Acts, there are multiple references to God building His church in Syria. Let me just limit myself to one example, a city that we've already commented on in passing, and that is Antioch.

[34 : 03] As I mentioned before, the modern day Antioch is a city called Antakia, and it's in southern Turkey. But in the New Testament, Antioch was very much within the territory of Syria.

Not that far from, if we think of modern cities that we hear in the news, Aleppo would be, I don't know, 50 miles from Antioch. Now we've already noted the origins of the church in Antioch.

It was a result of the scattering of believers in Jerusalem at the time of Stephen's death. But of course, we know that this Syrian city was to play a pivotal role in God building and growing His church in and from Syria.

We've read in chapter 11 of how the church grew. We read also in the passage that we read that it was in Antioch that the believers were first called Christians.

But perhaps even more significantly, we also discovered, and this is not in the passage that we read, that Antioch was the base for the Gentile mission.

[35 : 08] In Acts chapter 13, in verse 1, we read in the church at Antioch, there were prophets and teachers, Barnabas, Simeon, called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manahen, who had been brought up with Herod the Tetrarch, and Saul.

While they were worshiping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, Set apart from me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them. And of course, that work was to be missionaries to the Gentiles.

At Antioch, in a formal way, the mission to the Gentiles begins. Now, we're Gentile believers, and so in a very real sense, we can trace our Christian origins to Syria, to Antioch, to that city in Syria.

We have a debt of gratitude, a spiritual debt of gratitude to Syria. What about today? Can God build His church in and from Syria?

Well, we can pray. We can pray that as in those early days of the church in Antioch, the Lord's hand be with His people in Syria. There's that expression in chapter 11, the Lord's hand was with them.

[36 : 19] And then we read of the growth, the many who became believers. Why? Because the Lord's hand was with them. Well, let us pray that the Lord's hand would be with His people in Syria.

Perhaps as we look forward to when the war ends, an end it must. might that be in God's providence and opportunity for God's people and God's message, God's fame to spread all over Syria with the backdrop of a religion of death that has cast its dark shadow over Syria.

How that nation needs and thirsts for good news. And there is no better good news than the good news concerning Jesus, the Prince of Peace.

Well, let's pray. Heavenly Father, we do pray that Your hand would be with Your people in Syria. That Your hand would accompany and prosper every effort that is made even in the midst of the chaos and the violence to make known Jesus, that His fame would spread all over Syria.

We readily acknowledge our lack of faith, how even as we pray we find it difficult to imagine that this will happen. But we thank You that You are not limited by our lack of faith.

[37 : 41] And so we pray that it would indeed be so, that as in the days of Jesus' ministry in Galilee, many from Syria heard and experienced and spread His fame, so today that might also happen.

We pray that You would help us to recognize the ways in which we can be involved as we pray, as we support, as we give, and that You would give us wisdom to do so in a manner that is considered and wise and sacrificial.

And all of these things we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.