

The Church in time of Crisis \* Acts 11 & 12

January 10, 2021 \* Langford Community Church \* Graham Gladstone

With the return of lockdown circumstances, it's had me wondering lately 'what should a church do in times of crisis?' Like, when things go wrong in the world around us, what should our priorities be? Should we hunker down and disappear from the scene? Should we turn inwards and focus on ourselves?

That's certainly one way to handle it but I think that there's a better way. And so what I want to do today is take you to three crisis situations in the book of Acts to see how the Church acted in light of these circumstances. Admittedly, there is no coronavirus in the pages of the NT, but we are going to see a famine and pastors thrown in jail and I would argue that those are significant crises too. So let's look at some case studies in the book of Acts to see how the Church responded to crises in the world around them.

First, let's go to Acts 11, starting in verse 25. Now I'm going to start at verse 25 just so I can take you into a big moment in church history. So verse 25 –

25 Then Barnabas went to Tarsus to look for Saul,

26 and when he found him, he brought him to Antioch. So for a whole year Barnabas and Saul met with the church and taught great numbers of people. *The disciples were called Christians first at Antioch.*

Now that's momentous. The very first time followers of Jesus were called Christians is right here, Acts 11:26 in Antioch. Up to this point, they would have been called simply 'disciples' and Paul calls us 'Followers of the Way' a couple of times (Acts 22:4, 24:14), but from here on out, they and we were known of 'Christians' – people belonging to Christ. "The more you know."

And back to the main event – verse 27 -

27 During this time some prophets came down from Jerusalem to Antioch.

28 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.)

Now thanks to other people writing at the same time as the NT, we know that famines did indeed happen in the time of the Emperor Claudius. I read this week that "famine hit the empire during the first, second, fourth, ninth and eleventh years of Claudius's reign" (Darrell Bock, *Acts* (BECNT), 417.

A Jewish historian working for Rome named Josephus actually wrote -

"...a little before the beginning of this war, when Claudius was Emperor of the Romans, and Ismael was our High Priest; ... so great a famine (34) was come upon us, that one tenth deal [of wheat] was sold for four drachmæ... not one of the Priests was so hardy as to eat one crumb of it... Josephus: *Antiquities of the Jews*, Book III <https://penelope.uchicago.edu/josephus/ant-3.html> (Josephus<sup>1</sup>)

I did a little bit of math to try to put this in our terms, so \*roughly,\* the famine is so bad that six lbs of wheat will set you back four days labour. A drachma is what you'd pay a guy for a day's labour – four of those are going to get you a tenth of a bushel of wheat.

We're used to toilet paper being expensive – but that's extreme!

How did the church respond?

29 The disciples, each according to his ability, decided to provide help for the brothers living in Judea.  
30 This they did, sending their gift to the elders by Barnabas and Saul (Act 11:25-30 NIV).

Without a second thought, they voluntarily offered up their resources to share with others. And I think it's significant that it says 'each according to his ability.' They didn't have a tax or a tithe or go around and eyeball your car and say 'well, I think you can afford to give this.' Each person decided to give according to what he had. This is no-pressure, out of the generosity of your heart, out of gratitude and trust in and for God's provision giving.

And I think that that's one thing that churches need to do in a crisis. Give generously to help others.

And I'm really proud of the way that we responded this year as a church. We set aside in the church budget \$500 for a benevolent fund, money that we could use to help others – we emptied that providing meals to the Blessing Centre and then you refilled it and then we gave again to help Why Not. (Friendship house?). And on top of that, you prepared meals for Why Not and bought potatoes for Friendship house and gave to the Food Bank and continued giving faithfully so that we could keep on supporting our five missions at the same level as we always have. Good job. I never heard anybody say 'shouldn't we hold on to this, just in case?' We looked at the finances and made wise decisions, but we consciously said 'we can be fiscally responsible AND trust God and be generous' and we did. Way to go. Let's keep up the good work.

In time of crisis, the church shares its resources.

Now, if you slide your finger just a little ways down the page, to chapter 12, you'll find our next case study. Acts 12:1 says –

NIV Acts 12:1 It was about this time that King Herod arrested some who belonged to the church, intending to persecute them.

2 He had James, the brother of John, put to death with the sword... [and then he seized] Peter also, [intending] to bring him out for public trial after the Passover (Act 12:1-4 NIV).

CRISIS SITUATION, right? Persecution, martyrdom, imprisonment. This is code red, five alarm fire ... and how does the church respond?

Verse 5 - 5 So Peter was kept in prison, but the church was earnestly praying to God for him (Act 12:5 NIV).

How does the church respond to crisis? They pray to God. They pray to God because they know He is both powerful and compassionate enough to do something about it.

And boy does God ever do something about it. You probably know the story – the night before he was to go on trial, Peter was sleeping between two guards in prison when suddenly an angel appeared out of nowhere. He bopped Peter on the head and said 'Get up sleepy head' and the chains fell off his hands and out he went, out the door.

Verse 11 – Peter says "...Now I know without a doubt that the Lord sent his angel and rescued me from Herod's clutches and from everything the Jewish people were anticipating." (Act 12:11 NIV).

And then he goes back to the rest of his church and guess what they're doing? Verse 12 – still praying.

12 When this had dawned on him, he went to the house of Mary the mother of John, also called Mark, where many people had gathered and were praying. (Act 12:12 NIV).

They were committing themselves, their fears and anxieties, their prayers and petitions to the Lord. They were asking Him to intervene, to rescue Peter or to keep him faithful through it all. They didn't let this crisis drive them away from God; instead it drove them closer to God. And that's exactly what we need to do.

It many ways, it became my 'motto' in the early days of the pandemic. 'Prayer and precaution, not panic.' Right, we made good decisions and did wise things, but at the base of it all was prayer. Entrusting ourselves to God, asking Him to work, thanking Him for His protection to this point.

And in getting this together, I realized that we have not had a COVID specific prayer time and so I'd like to propose that we have a Zoom-enabled prayer time this coming Thursday at 7pm. We'll meet together on Zoom and pray for twenty minutes, half an hour – for the vaccine, for protection, for all the pieces involved. I think that that would be a good way for us to put this into action as a church.

Because in times of crisis, the church prays.

And that actually leads me to my final point, because on another occasion when Peter was put on trial, the church got to work praying. And it's what they prayed for that I want to look at. Turn over to Acts chapter 4 –

24 When they heard this, they raised their voices together in prayer to God. "Sovereign Lord," they said, "you made the heaven and the earth and the sea, and everything in them.

25 You spoke by the Holy Spirit through the mouth of your servant, our father David: " 'Why do the nations rage and the peoples plot in vain?

26 The kings of the earth take their stand and the rulers gather together against the Lord and against his Anointed One. '

27 Indeed Herod and Pontius Pilate met together with the Gentiles and the people of Israel in this city to conspire against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed.

28 They did what your power and will had decided beforehand should happen.

29 Now, Lord, consider their threats and enable your servants to speak your word with great boldness.

30 Stretch out your hand to heal and perform miraculous signs and wonders through the name of your holy servant Jesus."

31 After they prayed, the place where they were meeting was shaken. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God boldly (Act 4:24-31 NIV).

What did they pray? That God would enable them to speak his word with great boldness and to back it up with signs and wonders. They asked that God would help them to hold out hope.

You know, in the 'depths' of the pandemic, when there was so much anxiety and racial tension, I saw this new word popping up – not 'hate-mongering' but 'love-mongering.' People intentionally working to bring love into an otherwise difficult situation.

That's what we need to be as a church. Love-mongers. People who hold out hope.

Foundationally, that means holding out the Gospel to people, letting them know the Good News about eternal life through Jesus and we need to speak that word with great boldness. But on a secondary level, we just need to hold out hope. We need to be the voice of reason saying 'this too shall pass' and 'we're willing to help you through it.' In your workplace, in your home, in your family, in your neighbourhood, are you known as the person that brings everybody down? Or are you holding out hope – in the goodness of God, in the generosity of the human spirit, in the time after COVID?

We need to be a church that holds out hope.

This is not the first time that a crisis has hit the church and it probably won't be the last. I won't complain if there's not another one of these in my lifetime, but the reality is, these things happen. But as much as things change, our God remains the same. He is and will always be a rock and foundation and fortress in shield. Knowing that, in times of crisis, we the church shares its resources, prays to God and holds out hope.

1 Cor. 15:58 - Therefore, my beloved brothers, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labor is not in vain.

---

<sup>i</sup> Nay farther, a little before the beginning of this war, when Claudius was Emperor of the Romans, and Ismael was our High Priest; and when so great a famine (34) was come upon us, that one tenth deal [of wheat] was sold for four drachmæ: and when no less than seventy cori of flour were brought into the temple, at the feast of un-leav-ened bread: (these cori are thirty one Sicilian; but forty one Athenian medimni:) not one of the Priests was so hardy as to eat one crumb of it... Josephus: Antiquities of the Jews, Book III <https://penelope.uchicago.edu/josephus/ant-3.html>