

Well, I'd like it this morning, as we begin, I'd like for you to imagine something right here. And you have interacted with this as a child, probably, and I couldn't get my hands on one this morning. But imagine there is sitting right beside me an inflatable kind of punching bag of sorts. You remember these things from your youth. They had all different designs on them.

But the thing was, you would hit it and it would go down and pop back up again. Or you'd kick it, go down and pop back up again. No matter what you did to would go down and pop back up again. So we're going to use that this morning that you're going to. You're going to picture that sitting right here.

And that picture and the passage we're looking at are, these things are going to teach us about the church. We're going to look at Acts 11, and we're going to start in verse 19. And throughout this time, I'm going to read to you several verses from this passage. And their only select verses are going to be up on the screen. So I invite you to open up your Bible and follow along.

Or perhaps you're just listening and picturing these words as I read them. But the first section is Acts 11, 19, 21. Now, those who had been scattered by the persecution that broke out when Stephen was killed, they traveled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus and Antioch, spreading the word only among 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. The Lord's hand was with them, and a great number of people believed and turned to the Lord.

So you get this reality. When we read about persecution, we see that when Jewish leaders who are breathing murderous threats, threats when they're joined with power hungry government leaders against Jesus followers, things get difficult. Stephen is killed, many others are imprisoned and persecuted in different ways. The church is scattered as far as Phoenicia and Cyprus and Antioch. So Antioch was around 300 miles away.

So the church, the people are scattering. And you might ask yourself the question as they were asking God, why are you allowing this to happen? This young church, this movement of Jesus followers, why is this persecution taking place? And people are, are pressed with this decision where they have to figure out, should we stay here and risk our, our lives, our family's lives and our livelihood, or should we flee and go somewhere else to an unknown place and in many ways still risk our lives and our family's lives and our livelihood? God, why are you allowing this to happen?

And what are we supposed to do? And there's not a one size fits all answer where God didn't call all his people to stay and remain in Jerusalem. He didn't call all his people to go spread out into different places, but he called some to stay in Jerusalem and some to go out to different places. So first they would go out and they would tell just the Jews about the news, the good news of Jesus, who is the Messiah. And then eventually some started telling Greeks and those from other nations about this Jesus who is the Lord and Savior.

And so what happens next is we read in verse 21, the Lord's hand was with them and a great number of people believed and turned to the Lord. So initially we might ask the question, why this persecution? And we might initially have this somewhat simplistic, not very satisfying answer that is, well, the answer to why persecution is look at what, look at what happened then. The church spread and all these people came to put their faith in Christ.

We'll keep exploring together this somewhat satisfying answer that doesn't quite answer all our questions. But the movement we see in this passage that we'll continue to see is this, that things are difficult. Followers of Jesus look to

him and his kingdom grows. When we talk in Scripture about His kingdom, that's acknowledging that this kingdom, it's not a place, but it's a people. It's a people submitting to the rule of Jesus.

When we talk about his kingdom growing, then it's growing in two ways. It's growing broadly in the sense that more and more people are giving, placing their allegiance. And with King Jesus, it's growing deeper in that each individual follower of Jesus is growing in their faith and in their ability and their faithfulness in placing their allegiance in Jesus. So things are difficult followers of Jesus. Look to him and his kingdom grows.

This theme or this movement is, is what I think Luke is beautifully communicating as he writes historical account in Acts 11 through 12. Now this doesn't justify persecution and this doesn't take away the sadness of persecution. People still die and people are still mistreated. And there's a stronger power at work that is not getting thwarted. God's kingdom keeps on growing.

So let's keep following Luke's account and we, we see it next that the church in Jerusalem, they hear about the growth of this movement of Jesus followers. In Antioch, remember 300 miles away and, and they send Barnabas to go find out what's happening up in Antioch. Now Antioch at that time would have been a city of around 600,000 people. So it was a multiethnic, multicultural, very influential city. It would have been the third largest city in the Greco Roman world at that time. Only, you know, only behind Rome and Alexandria.

So we have this huge city. People from all over the world are in this city and there's this movement of Jesus followers. And so the church in Jerusalem sends Barnabas up to, to see what's going on. Now you'll remember that Barnabas, he is the same Barnabas from Acts 6 who was appointed as a deacon. He was the same Barnabas from Acts 9 who supported Saul when others were a little afraid of him and didn't know what to do with Saul.

Barnabas was this super encourager, full of the Holy Spirit and he sees the good in others and he does a wonderful job fanning the flame of the good in others. So he's encouraged by what he sees. He encourages the believers there in Antioch and a great number of them believe in the Lord. Verse 11:24 states this about Barnabas. He was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and faith, and a great number of people were brought to the Lord.

So again, this, this movement is clear that things are difficult. Followers of Jesus look to him and his kingdom grows. So then when we look at verses 25 through 27, we read that, well then Barnabas went to Tarsus to look for Saul 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. And the disciples were called Christians first at Antioch.

So in Acts 9 you might remember that Saul there was, you know, people in Jerusalem didn't know what to do with him. So the apostles decided to send him up to Tarsus. Now Tarsus, Paul was there for several years, probably asking God, God, why am I here? What are you doing with me in Tarsus? And now we come to this point where Barnabas is in Antioch, this large influential city with followers of Jesus, not just Jews, but people from every nation.

And Barnabas is thinking, how can I equip these people from all sorts of nations to understand the Gospel? And he remembers, well, there's Saul. Saul was incredibly gifted at this. And Saul happens to be in Tarsus, which is not very far from Antioch. So God has positioned Saul in that place.

Barnabas goes and gets Saul and they come to Antioch and they have this incredible fruitful ministry where we read, remember in verse 26, that they taught great numbers of people. And then we see in verse 26 this interesting reality that the Christians were called Christians first at Antioch. So there's two things that I find encouraging about that. One, this what united the believers was their Christ likeness. I love that that was the unifying characteristic.

And then what is also encouraging is this is the point at which this faith that the Jews had in Jesus grew beyond the description of, oh, this is the faith of the Jews. Because now in Antioch, this is no longer just the faith of the Jews, but it's the faith of men and women from many different nations. So it can't be called the faith of the Jews. It's now they are now called Christians, a term that goes beyond just one ethnic group, but describes all those followers of Jesus from every tribe and nation that are following Jesus, their little Christ. They're Christians.

Things are difficult. Followers of Jesus. Look to him and his kingdom grows. In the next paragraph, in verse 26, we read about this prophet named Agabus, where he comes and he prophesies a great famine that is about to come to the land. So again, we might ask this question, God, why things?

Things are going well. You know, your word is growing in this influential state city. Why a famine? Why now? And this interesting thing happens is as the famine does occur, and whether it's because it was prophesied or whether the people in Antioch had certain provisions and resources, the people in Antioch put together help and resources that they could send through Saul and Barnabas down to Jerusalem.

So they put together these resources and sent them to the church in Jerusalem. So you have this beautiful picture of the unity, the community of the Christian church, where the sending church in Jerusalem sent the Gospel to Antioch. And now we have the people in Antioch finding a way that they can serve and support the church in Jerusalem. And the church is working together in this beautiful way. Again, the movement is clear. Things are difficult.

Followers of Jesus look to him and his kingdom grows. Meanwhile, we step into chapter 12 and we read this sad story about King Herod who. He had James, the brother of John, killed. And you'll remember that James is one of the 12 apostles. And this was a deep blow to the movement of Jesus followers.

And then shortly after that, Herod has Peter arrested and thrown into prison to await trial. After the Passover, people had been so pleased some by what Herod did with James, then Herod thinks, well, I'm going to do the same thing now to Peter. And then this is an incredible story that I encourage you to go back and read with your kids or read on your own. In verses 1 through 18 in chapter 12, what happens to Peter when he's in prison is he has what feels like a dream. And he's heavily guarded in this prison.

And angels come and they, they get rid of the chains that are shackling him and the soldiers that are all around him don't even know. And Peter gets up, walks right out of prison, finds himself on the street outside of prison and comes awake in a sword and realizes that this wasn't a dream, this was for real. He can't believe what God has done. And he goes to this house where other Jesus followers were praying for him, and he tells them about what God has done. And the people are grown and spurred on in their faith.

And we see again this incredible thing about how God rescued Peter. So again, this reality that things are difficult, Jesus followers look to him and his kingdom will grow. But there is this nagging question, right? For those of you who remember what happened in the first couple verses of chapter 12, Herod had James killed. So why did God rescue Peter and not rescue James?

It's true that, that the faith of the believers is growing and, and it's true that the number of believers is growing. But why did the Lord rescue Peter and not James? More why? Questions come up as we read chapter 12, verses 19 through 24 and see that, that Herod, he goes to the soldiers that were supposed to be watching Peter and he finds out what went on when Peter got away from them somehow and he has those soldiers killed. And we ask, ah, God, that doesn't seem like justice.

I mean, I know they were soldiers, they were doing the wrong thing to Peter, but it's not their fault that he was miraculously released from prison. So we want justice on Herod. And then as we continue to read, well, what happens next is Herod gains such political approval from these kinds of things that he's doing, that he's getting puffed up with pride to the extent that then God sends an angel of the Lord that strikes Herod down dead. Justice. But why didn't God arrange that sooner?

Why didn't God arrange that before Herod killed James and persecuted so many others? So again, the movement is clear. Things are difficult. Followers of Jesus look to him and his kingdom will grow. So what do you make of this?

This mix of there's difficulty and there's spiritual growth and, and how do these two work together in such a way where it seems like they are intrinsically linked in God's economy? When I believe this biblical account, four principles stick out for me. I want to walk through those briefly with you. The first is this, that God works in and through circumstances to, to position people for his kingdom work.

So we see this with the persecution in Jerusalem where people were scattered to all of these different places, Felicia, Cyprus and Antioch. They share the good news and people come to the Lord. So it's clear that God uses circumstances to position people for his kingdom work. Saul was positioned up in Tarsus, right where Barnabas needed him in Antioch. And they came together and, and did this incredible ministry in Antioch.

Number two, God can rescue people from pain and suffering. Peter is a great example of this. Rescued from prison. Those in Jerusalem who were recipients from the gift of the Antioch Church that Saul and Barnabas brought down to them were again, this evidence that God can rescue people from pain and suffering. We look throughout the Gospels and we have countless stories of the crippled person is healed, the blind person is healed, the leopard is healed, Lazarus is raised, Lazarus is raised from the dead.

God can rescue his people from pain and suffering. We have our own experience of this, where you can think of experiences you've had in life where this has happened to you. Or we have a long list of people in our church family who have stepped into cancer or other illnesses and come through on the other side and seen evidence that God can rescue people from pain and suffering.

Number three is this, that God allows pain and suffering. I mean, the early church was persecuted. Stephen was killed, James was killed, countless others over, over that time and in centuries since. And even now Christians are persecuted and sometimes to death. You've experienced it in your own life, whether it's through strained relationships, through experiences with cancer, of, for yourself or of a loved one, mental illness.

The list could go on. God does allow pain and suffering. So the fourth principle is this, that God works through pain. And suffering to spiritually shape us. Saul says these, gives these encouraging, challenging thoughts.

In Second Corinthians, chapter 4, verses 16 through 17, he says, therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day, for our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. Paul is giving a clear testimony that his experience is the extreme difficulty that he's experienced in life. The pain and the suffering that the Lord is working through that incredible ways to shape him into Christ likeness. There's another instance there.

Paul writes in Second Corinthians 12, verses 9 through 10. And in that passage, Paul is crying out to the Lord about a certain pain that he's experiencing. He calls it the thorn in his flesh. And we're not sure what it is, but it's this pain in Paul's life. And he says, God, would you remove this from my life?

Would you remove this pain and suffering suffering? And the Lord responds, my grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness. So Paul says, therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weakness so that Christ's power may rest in me. That is why. All right, now stop right there.

So he boasts in his weakness because Christ power is in his weakness. I think of ways in my own life, as I'm sure you can, as well as you reflect on how have you been spiritually shaped through pain or suffering in your life. I can think back to high school and college and ways in which idols that I had were exposed. And that was painful for me. But what that brought was an understanding of my identity being based on who Christ is and who and how he sees me.

I think of my young adult life and the way that the Lord used loneliness to teach me to pursue greater intimacy with Jesus. I think of my married life and parenting life and how that exposes failures again and again that really lead me to understand more about the extent of God's grace. So maybe some of you are thinking, all right, I know these principles, this. This idea that God works in and through circumstances to position people for his kingdom work. God can rescue people from pain and suffering.

God allows pain and suffering, and God works through pain and suffering to spiritually shape us. I know these principles. I see this. This movement, this idea that things are difficult. Followers of Jesus look to him and his kingdom grows.

I see that. But I still want to know why. Why is all this happening, Father? Or maybe what it is, is it's not so much I want to know why is. I just don't want it to hurt so much.

Why pain and suffering? Why do I need to go through this?

I'm challenged by Isaiah 55, verses 8 through 9, where God reveals this to Isaiah. He says, for my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, declares the Lord, as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts. So this to think that a finite being can understand fully an infinite God. God is graciously reminding us that you can't understand me completely and my ways. The book of Job is this incredible book where Job, you know, for the first 39, 40 chapters, job is asking God, with very colorful language, why?

Why is this happening? Why so much pain and suffering? And God's response to Job? He comes. It's beautiful.

In verse or in chapter 42, God has come and revealed himself to Job. And what does Job do? He drops his questions. He says, now I have seen the Lord. I love how we sang earlier this idea.

All the angels cry holy. All creation cries holy. So when the angels see who God is, when all creation sees who God is, when they experience God, then the burdens. We also sang the burden is lifted in his presence. My trophies are laid down at his feet.

When I see God, the why questions drop. And I see who he is. And. And that changes everything. So this isn't to say, don't ask why, but it's to say, ask why.

Ask God why. Talk to God about this. Look to God as you talk about this. Here's the hard thing that you will almost never find a satisfying answer to the deep why questions. But if you're looking to God, you will find him.

You will find, as you look to him, that there is a just, loving, powerful God who exists in the midst of all of this. And nothing can thwart his purposes. His kingdom keeps on growing. The powers of Egypt and Assyria and Persia and Greece and Rome. They came and they went.

The powers of communism and terrorism. They combat his kingdom, but his kingdom keeps on growing. The movement of atheism seeks to discredit his kingdom, but his kingdom keeps on growing. The temptation of materialism and the allure of hedonism. They conspire to draw people away from his kingdom, but his kingdom keeps on growing.

The pain of death and suffering, of injustice and the collective destruction of natural disasters and environmental pollutions, they keep rolling. And somehow they don't thwart God's purposes. His kingdom keeps on growing.

So here's where I want you to learn the lesson from this inflatable punching bag that you forgot about, but it's right here. And what happens is every time, no matter how you hit it, it keeps on popping back up. And it's because it's not about how you hit it or where you hit it. It's about what it is made of. Okay?

It's mostly inflated air on the top and it's a solid base at the bottom. So no matter what you do, the air is lighter than the base at the bottom and that thing is always going to pop back up. So the church, God's kingdom, no matter what happens, his kingdom keeps on growing. And it's not about what happens to it, but it's about how it is made by a sovereign God, an awesome God who is all powerful and all knowing. And he works through placing his spirit within his people.

And because of how his kingdom is made, it will keep on growing and growing and growing. So our decision is this. Are we going to put our allegiance in that kingdom that will always keep on growing? Are we going to fight against it?

I want to pray and just give you a moment to interact with the Lord as we ponder that question. Father, you are good to us and we praise you for your power and love. And may it be that we would respond well to your love. Thank you. That you in power will always have your kingdom growing.

In your name, Jesus, I pray.