

"The First Church Plant"
Pastor Wally Contreras
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"Now those who had been scattered by the persecution in connection with Stephen traveled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus and Antioch, telling the message only to 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. News of this reached the ears of the church at Jerusalem, and they sent Barnabas to Antioch. When he arrived and saw the evidence of the grace of God, he was glad and encouraged them all to remain true to the Lord with all their hearts. He was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and faith, and a great number of people were brought to the Lord. 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. The disciples were called Christians first at Antioch. 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.) 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." (Acts 11:19-30)

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Meanwhile, back at the ranch... "those who had been scattered by the persecution in connection with Stephen traveled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus and Antioch, telling the message only to Jews." "On January 9, 1985, Pastor Hristo Kulichev, a Congregational pastor in Bulgaria, was arrested and put in prison. His crime was that he preached in his church even though the state had appointed another man the pastor whom the congregation did not elect. His trial was a mockery of justice. And he was sentenced to eight months imprisonment. During his time in prison he made Christ known every way he could. When he got out he wrote, "Both prisoners and jailers asked many questions, and it turned out that we had a more fruitful ministry there than we could have expected in church. God was better served by our presence in prison than if we had been free.'" (Herbert Schlossberg, *Called to Suffer, Called to Triumph*, p. 230) Jesus told us in Luke 21:12-13 that "...before all this they will lay their hands on you and persecute you, delivering you up to the synagogues and prisons, and you will be brought before kings and governors for my name's sake. This will be your opportunity to bear witness." During hard times in my life, how difficult is it for me to see those times as an "opportunity to bear witness" to a lost world? Explain.

Regarding persecution, John Piper pointed out that "[t]he lesson is not just that God is sovereign and turns setbacks to triumphs. The lesson is that comfort and ease and affluence and prosperity and safety and freedom often cause a tremendous inertia in the church... The very things that we think would produce personnel and energy and creative investment of time and money in the cause of Christ and his kingdom, instead produce, again and again, the exact opposite—weakness, apathy, lethargy, self-centeredness, preoccupation with security." When all is right with the world in my life, do I tend to become apathetic, lethargic, self-centered and/or being preoccupied with maintaining a semblance of security in my life and why?

Pastor Wally spoke of the hand of the Lord and how through His leading, “a great number of people believed and turned to the Lord.” Pastor Wally also pointed out that it is very dangerous to pray for the hand of the Lord in my life. R.C. Sproul once spoke regarding God’s sovereignty: “On another occasion I was in a discussion with a friend, and I related to him some of the fears that were plaguing me. He said, “I thought you believed in the sovereignty of God.” “I do,” I said, “and that’s my problem.” He was puzzled by the answer, and I explained that I know enough about what the Bible teaches of God’s providence and of His sovereignty to know that sometimes God’s sovereign providence involves suffering and affliction for His people. That we are in the care of a sovereign God whose providence is benevolent does not exclude the possibility that He may send us into periods of trials and tribulations that can be excruciatingly painful. Though I trust God’s Word that in the midst of such experiences He will give to me the comfort of His presence and the certainty of my final deliverance into glory, in the meantime I know that the way of affliction and pain may be difficult to bear... I don’t look forward to the experience of pain with a giddy anticipation; rather, there are times when it’s necessary for me and for others to grit our teeth and to bear the burdens of the day.” How willing am I to “grit” my teeth and “bear the burdens of the day”? Explain.

In Numbers 11:21-23, “...Moses said, ‘Here I am among six hundred thousand men on foot, and you say, ‘I will give them meat to eat for a whole month!’ Would they have enough if flocks and herds were slaughtered for them? Would they have enough if all the fish in the sea were caught for them?’ The LORD answered Moses, ‘Is the LORD’s arm too short? You will now see whether or not what I say will come true for you.’” God promised Moses that he would provide food in the middle of the desert for more than an estimated two million people (once you add in the women and children) and God asked Moses if he believed God could actually do what He promised. (See also: Genesis 18:14; Isaiah 50:2; Isaiah 59:1; and, Jeremiah 32:17 and 27). Are there times in my life when I believed that “the Lord’s arm [is] too short” to handle the situation I faced? If so, how so? If not, why not?

Pastor Wally also spoke about how God pre-positioned people and events to get the Gospel message from Jerusalem Jews to Antioch Gentiles. John Piper recounted this story: “In the 1930s, thousands of Koreans fled what is now North Korea when the Japanese invaded. Many of them settled in the USSR around Vlapostok. Many of them were Christians and so by the suffering of the Koreans the gospel of Jesus was being carried into central USSR. But the grace of God was just beginning to be visible. Joseph Stalin saw the Koreans around Vlapostok as a security risk to the weapons manufacturing center. So he relocated them to five areas around the Soviet Union, spreading the Christians even farther into the Muslim areas of the USSR (just like the persecuted Christians that went to Antioch). One of the places they were sent was to Tashkent the center of the 20,000,000 Muslim Uzbek people who had violently resisted western efforts to bring Christianity. Over the next decades these

Koreans became an accepted part of Uzbek society. Then, with Glasnost and Perestroika, on June 2, 1990, the first open air Christian meeting in the history of Soviet Central Asia happened. God used this meeting to awaken the Korean Christians especially, and the upshot was that the decades of acceptance by the Muslim Uzbeks and Kazaks has allowed the spread of good news about Jesus far more widely than it could have with merely western influence. In other words, the grace of God was at work in all this.” In what way(s) have I seen the hand of the Lord working in my life and the life of my family over the years?

We learned of the prophesied famine (“According to Josephus (Ant. XX. 2. 5 and 5. 2), a severe famine took place in Judea while Cuspius Fadus and Tiberius Alexander were successively procurators...This famine is without doubt the one referred to by Agabus in Acts 11:28.” (The Famine which Took Place in the Reign of Claudius, Biblehub.com, footnote 326). When they heard of the upcoming famine in Judea, the church asked what they intended to do with that information in Antioch and the *disciples (church members)* “decided to provide help for the brothers living in Judea.” We have committed to supporting first-time missionaries “George” and “Judy”. What are some way(s) we can put His grace into action to provide help to them...even help that they don’t yet even know that they may need? Explain.

The words ‘decided to provide help’ tells me that each of them was dead serious about meeting the need. 2 Corinthians 9:7 reminds me that, “[e]ach man should give what he has decided in his heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver” (emphasis added). When it comes to giving back to God a portion of that which He has so abundantly given to me, would God see it as something I do reluctantly, under compulsion or that I do cheerfully and why?

Once the church in Antioch decided that they would provide famine relief to Judea, Scripture simply states “This they did”. Can that be said of my commitment to pray for and share the Gospel with my “Who’s Your One”?

Are there promises or commitments that I’ve made to God that I cannot honestly say “this I did” and if so, what do I plan to do about that situation?