

Life Group Questions

March 3rd, 2024

Seeing with God's Eyes – Pastor Ray Harms-Wiebe – **Acts 11:19-30; 13:1-3**

Thank you for your dedication to lead the Life Group. **Please review the questions, selecting any you believe will be most helpful for your group and adapting as needed.** You don't need to go through everything. Ask the Holy Spirit to guide your group so that your discussion will build everyone up to love God and each other more.

Note from Pastor Jonathan

Hey Life Groups,

I hope you all enjoyed Pastor Ray's sermon and saw how God is at work in Willingdon Church. I also want you all to know that Life Groups wouldn't be what they are today without leaders *and* members faithfully gathering to worship God and grow together. I am blessed and thankful to be a part of this ministry alongside all of you. I also hope you have been encouraged to continually ask God to use you to further His mission at Willingdon Church and beyond.

As a heads up, next week begins our Easter series. It feels like we just celebrated Christmas and now Easter is around the corner! Easter is a time when many lapsed Christians and non-Christians consider attending church. Don't wait until Easter to do something about it! Now is a great time to begin thinking about and praying for people you can invite. Ask God to provide opportunities to talk to them about Easter and pray that God's Spirit makes their heart open to the invite.

Love you guys,

Pastor Jonathan Hsieh
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Question List



1. How does God use persecution to spread the Gospel?



2. Pray for the spread of the Gospel in the face of persecution.



3. How do people belonging to Christ stand out?



4. How can we be like Barnabas and exhort each other to remain faithful to Jesus with steadfast purpose?



5. Go around the room and encourage each other.

Opening Question



1. How does God use persecution to spread the Gospel?

Check out **SPREAD BY PERSECUTION** in the appendix to get some context for today's passage.

Here are some ways it plays out now:

Focus. One of the biggest dangers to Christians isn't persecution. It's comfort! The church in Laodicea had plenty of material needs, so they didn't need Jesus (Revelation 3:14-22). Even back in Deuteronomy, God warned His people to not get too comfortable and forget about Him (Deuteronomy 8:11-20). We also see the opposite pattern in the Bible. Sometimes God uses suffering to bring the people to remember Him. Think of the Book of Judges or the Exile.

It's easy for us to get comfortable with our Christian lives. Worship services become a place to enjoy our preferences. Life Groups turn into hangouts. God becomes a genie or vending machine. But when gathering becomes risky, we have to ask ourselves what's the point of following Jesus and whether it's worth it.

Demonstrate Power. God's most amazing power is changing lives. Paul was "breathing threats and murder" against Christians (Acts 9:1). But God turned him around, so he passionately gave his life for Jesus.

God can also use the unlikeliest people to spread the Gospel. The fact that governments, religions, and mobs can't stop the Gospel shows God's power. Check out how a small group of poor women in India shared the Gospel with millions of people (<https://youtu.be/M26-xSZpFZs?si=B3vL6IJOC5FfUYDH>).

Voice of the Martyrs is a great resource to learn more stories of God using persecution to grow His church: <https://www.persecution.com/stories/2024/>.



2. Pray for the spread of the Gospel in the face of persecution.

God used persecution to spread the Gospel, but it wasn't easy. The Christians in the world facing persecution need God's power!

Here are some things you can pray for ...

Strong Faith. They need to fully rely on God during these times. They will be going through lots of sacrifice and loss, much of it we can't even imagine. Pray that God will be with them to withstand all their trials.

Comfort. Many Christians suffer loss from persecution. They need God's peace and love that goes beyond any earthly comfort. They need to know that God still loves them and that there is hope beyond this life.

Gospel openings. God won't let these persecutions go to waste. Pray that God will use these opportunities for the Gospel to be spread. Pray that persecutors will become believers, just like the Apostle Paul.

Wisdom to Participate. There's some significant pushback to Christianity in Canada, but we aren't worried about loss of family or death. That doesn't mean we can't also play a part. Those Christians facing persecution are our family in Jesus. So, let's pray that we can fight alongside them.

Julia and Kevin Garrett were imprisoned in China for over two years. Here's what Julia says you can pray for: https://youtu.be/J91c_nCaz1M?si=bTbbXgOb-VNtvTpu.



3. How do people belonging to Christ stand out?

We're used to being called Christian and this was the first time when followers of Jesus were first called Christian. As Pastor Ray pointed out, the word Christian means "belonging to Christ" or "identifying with Christ".

It's also worth noting the Christians didn't give themselves that name. The verb "called" is passive, meaning it was probably non-Christians who called the first Christians Christian. Non-Christians saw these Christians were different from them, so they gave them a name.

King Agrippa uses the term Christian during Paul's testimony. "In a short time would you persuade me to be a **Christian**?" (Acts 26:28). Even Roman historian Tacitus uses the term:

Tacitus, Annals 15.44

Consequently, to get rid of the report, Nero fastened the guilt and inflicted the most exquisite tortures on a class hated for their abominations, called **Christians** by the populace. **Christus**, from whom the name had its origin, suffered the extreme penalty during the reign of Tiberius at the hands of one of our procurators, Pontius Pilatus, and a most mischievous superstition...

These people became known for belonging to Jesus and the name has stuck ever since.

See **CHRISTIANS IN ANTIOCH** in the appendix to see how Christians stood out in their time.

What are some ways that we stand out as Christians in the Vancouver Metro Area?

Love. While the world may look down on certain minorities, social classes, ethnicities, or people with disabilities or shameful pasts. Christians don't show favoritism (James 2:1) because we are all sinners who didn't deserve Jesus' payment for our sins. Jesus loves people of all types. Willingdon Church is special because there aren't many institutions that love and welcome such a variety of people.

Priorities. Non-Christians have more freedom to do what they want, but we prioritize corporate worship (e.g., Sunday service), gatherings (e.g., Life Groups), and alone time with God. I remember skipping out on late Saturday night hangs and parties in university because I had Sunday worship the next morning. We're willing to give up fun through Sunday sports leagues, farmers' markets, trips, and more. Our non-Christian friends may be baffled, so you can tell them that spending time with God is a wonderful privilege and opportunity.

Boundaries. We have lots of freedom in Canada, but just because things are lawful it doesn't mean they're helpful or build up (1 Corinthians 10:23). Our friends may go out for some drinks, but we know we should stop before it stops us from thinking clearly (Ephesians 5:18). It's great having friends of the opposite gender, but we know not to put ourselves in tempting or compromising situations.



4. How can we be like Barnabas and exhort each other to remain faithful to Jesus with steadfast purpose?

Exhort is translated from the Greek word παρακαλέω (par-ak-al-eh'-o), meaning "to urge strongly, appeal to, urge, exhort, encourage" (BDAG). It's made up of two parts, παρα (para) "near" and καλέω (kaleo) "call". You can think of it as calling someone to go near or in a direction.

Did you know Barnabas isn't even his real name? In Acts 4, we learn about "Joseph, who was also called by the apostles Barnabas (which means son of encouragement), a Levite, a native of Cyprus," (Acts 4:36). That is the *only* time in Acts that he's referred to as Joseph. After that Luke only refers to him as Barnabas. That's awesome. He's so encouraging that Luke essentially just calls him Mr. Encouragement instead of his real name. Even the Holy Spirit calls him Barnabas (Acts 13:2)!

Not everybody will be as gifted in encouragement as Barnabas, but we can still do our part! We can still encourage one other by ...

Encourage the encouragers. Barnabas was so encouraging the apostles pointed it out and gave him the name. No doubt Barnabas was encouraged by how encouraged people were by his encouragement, so he continued to encourage and be encouraged.

God has blessed our church with amazing Barnabases/Barnabi. Make sure you let them know you see what God is doing through them. Let them know their words make an impact. There have been times when I encouraged others but didn't get any encouragement back. It can get kind of discouraging. It's not that I needed rewards and recognition for encouraging, but I needed to know that my efforts were effective so I could confidently continue.

Point people to Jesus. Barnabas encouraged people to "remain faithful to the Lord". Sometimes we're scared of encouraging because we think we must be "the guy/gal" people rely on as if we're calling them to trust us or look to us. But we encourage people to look to and trust in Jesus because we all know we are weak and fail. Only Jesus died for our sins and only Jesus is perfect. Only Jesus can clean us of our sins (1 John 1:9). Only Jesus will never us (Hebrews 13:5). You get the idea.

Remind each other of our purpose. Unlike prosperity Gospel preachers, Barnabas didn't point people to Jesus to get what they wanted. He also didn't flatter people to get favors. He encouraged them to remain faithful to Jesus "with steadfast purpose." Jesus called all His disciples to make disciples (Matthew 28:18-20) and tell people about Him (Acts 1:8). As a result, "many people were added to the Lord." These new Christians became disciple-makers!

As we encourage, let's not forget to encourage people to make disciples and be witnesses. It's good to say positive things about people, like their outfits or how they did in a sports ball game, but we need to make sure we encourage people to make disciples. That means pointing out when people use their spiritual gifts, model Jesus' love/sacrifice, share the Gospel, or otherwise do something that honors God.

Work on ourselves. Why did Barnabas encourage the Christians in Antioch to remain faithful to Jesus with purpose? Because Barnabas "was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and of faith." He was already walking in the Spirit and had built up his faith. His encouragement came as an overflow.

Sometimes we struggle to encourage others to follow Jesus because we aren't following Jesus ourselves. Let's work on ourselves first, otherwise, we'll burn out or even become hypocrites.

Team up. Barnabas saw he needed some help, so he traveled all the way to Tarsus. That's an almost 500-kilometer round trip on! On foot! It must have taken him a few weeks at least. Maybe even a month. Then they teamed up for a year "and taught a great many people."

Thankfully, we don't need to travel to Alberta to find people to be co-encouragers. You can team up with people in your own Life Group! Find others to encourage alongside you. It can make encouraging less awkward. And when things get tough, you can encourage each other.



5. Go around the room and encourage each other.

God is already at work in our Life Groups. Sometimes we may not notice, because we're too busy looking for bright neon signs. And because God isn't raising the dead or giving sight to the blind in our group, we think He isn't at work. In my experience, God's work is often subtle and slow. In Life Groups, we have the privilege to fan the embers and encourage them to grow into a bright flame. We can do that through encouragement, like Barnabas.

Sometimes we keep our positive, encouraging thoughts to ourselves. We may think "Well, I'm sure they already feel appreciated" or "They probably get enough encouragement already." But they might not! There have been times I only found out people were grateful for what I did years later. During those years I thought nobody liked my sermons or gatherings. I got discouraged. If only they had said something!

Here are a few easy ways to encourage each other:

Affirm gifts. Many Christians don't think they have a part to play in Jesus' purpose of making disciples. God gave gifts to all believers so all believers can serve each other (1 Peter 4:10). Sometimes people don't realize they've been gifted in a certain way because it just comes naturally to them, but they need to know God's doing some amazing work through them. They also need to see how their gifts are being used to make disciples.

Is anyone humbly serving others like Jesus? Maybe they're eager to do the thankless, but necessary, tasks like cleaning up after a potluck. Does anyone show compassion and care like Jesus? They can sense that someone is struggling and are moved to comfort them like Jesus would. Are people skilled at pointing people to Jesus during the discussions? God's equipped them to help others grow in their knowledge and appreciation of God's Word. Is someone always talking about how they're inviting their neighbors and friends to church or telling strangers about the Gospel? They need to know they're gifted evangelists.

Affirm fruit. Let people know the impact they make on the group! "Thanks for noticing I wasn't doing well last week and comforting me." "I really appreciated sharing. It helped me see an area I need to grow." "You're always so consistent. Your dedication inspires me to commit to Life Group, too." "When I joined the group, you made me feel so welcome!"

Appendix

SPREAD BY PERSECUTION



Jesus' ministry was mostly just in what was called Palestine. After His death and resurrection, Jesus told them to stay in Jerusalem until they "receive power when the Holy Spirit" to be "witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth" (Acts 1:4-8). After they receive the Holy Spirit, they still stay in the region.

Later in Acts 6, Stephen preaches about Jesus and does amazing miracles. Jews from all over the Roman Empire (Cyrene, Alexandria, Cilicia, and Asia) come and try to shut him down (Acts 6:8-10). They can't win any debates, so they forcefully take him to the high priest while throwing false accusations (Acts 6:11-15). Stephen calls them out for having the same prophet-killing attitude as their ancestors (Acts 7:51-53). As icing on the cake, he tells the crowd he sees Jesus at the right hand of God (Acts 7:56). They go nuts and kill him, leaving their clothes with a guy named Saul/Paul (Acts 7:57-58; 22:20).

Stephen's death kicks off big persecution against Christians in Jerusalem, so most Christians leave (Acts 8:1). Instead of living comfortably in a place with lots of other Christians, they spread out and tell others about Jesus (Acts 8:4). Paul goes on a rampage against Christianity, even getting permission to travel outside the region to hunt down Christians (Acts 9:1-2). Christians are forced to keep going further away to stay safe.

I've read the book of Acts before, but this time I looked up some geography. It's shocking how far away they came from. Cyrene was in modern-day Libya. And it's funny because Jews from Cyrene tried to stop Christianity. Now Christians from Cyrene are traveling to spread Christianity.

CHRISTIANS IN ANTIOCH

Antioch is in modern-day Turkey. It was the third largest city in the Greco-Roman world. There were up to 600,000 people there, with up to 25,000 Jews. That means most people believed something very different from the Bible.

Here are a few ways Christians stood out.

Idols. In Antioch, people worshipped Zeus, Apollos, Poseidon, Adonis, and Tyche which usually involved idols. Most religions back then involved some physical representation of a particular god.

In Ephesus, a silversmith who made idols of Artemis rallied other tradespeople who made idols. He got them angry at Christians because people weren't buying idols because they were turning to Jesus (Acts 19:23-28). Paul also used the abundance of idols in the market to preach the Gospel in Athens (Acts 17:16-33). Today, many Hindus, Buddhists, and others have idols or shrines in their homes. Idols are just a way of life.

Imagine a non-Christian going into a Christian's home and seeing the lack of an idol. "Hey, so what god does your family worship?" It must have stood out. There were instances when Christians were accused of being atheists because they worshipped an invisible God.

A lack of idols and worshipping deities was a real problem for Christian tradespeople. Many people belonged to guilds for their trade and each guild had a patron deity. To be a part of that trade meant celebrating events dedicated to that god. Imagine if your work mixers involved sacrificing to Zeus or Apollos. Not participating would get you ostracized. The temptation to compromise faith to fit in is possibly the referent in some New Testament passages (e.g., 1 Corinthians 10:19-22).

Value of Wives. Ancient Greco-Roman morality was wild. As Pastor Ray preached last Sunday, wives were often viewed as objects that husbands owned. Christians, however, believe that women are equally loved and valued by God (Galatians 3:28). Instead of using the wife, husbands were called to sacrificially love them (Ephesians 5:25-30).

It might be normal for a wife to slavishly serve her husband while he hangs out with his guests, but in Christian homes, the husbands take care of their wives.

Sadly this kind of treatment of women is still fairly common. In many parts of the world, women are still considered lesser. For example, take a look at a recent report from UN Women on Georgia's (the European country) view on violence against women:

<https://eca.unwomen.org/en/stories/news/2023/12/new-study-shows-social-norms-regarding-violence-against-women-are-changing-in-georgia>.

In *Dispatches from the Front* (Ask me about the videos!), Tim Keesee visits a city in Albania.

Dispatches from the Front, 64

In Albanian culture, a man can beat or rape his wife, and it's considered normal. Men sometimes even get their wives by kidnapping them—and usually their relationship goes downhill from there. But Astrit is a Christian husband, and Vjollca is a Christian wife; and so their marriage is a new creation in Christ, too. Astrit is also a Christian father, so he loves his daughters as he loves his son. In the culture here, girls are generally unwelcomed and unwanted, but the gospel is transforming that kind of thinking every day in this home.

Sexual Ethic. Sex was about dominance in the Greco-Roman world. Men could have sex with men, women, children, whomever. Even worshipping gods often involved temple prostitutes. But Christians believed sex was a consensual act between a husband and wife. Christians even believed lusting over a woman who wasn't your wife was adultery (Matthew 5:28).

Allegiance. Some of the emperors claimed to be a god. For example, Caesar Augustus minted coins with his face and the words “Son of a God” (<https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/1/1e/S0484.4.jpg>). While Roman citizens were made to declare “Caesar is Lord”, Christians could only say, “Jesus is Lord” (Romans 10:9; 2 Corinthians 4:4).

Choose Your Next Step

What next step will you commit to for the upcoming week (and beyond)?

Closing Prayer

A closing prayer is an effective way to point people back to our Loving Father as they seek to apply their new learnings throughout the week. Ask group members to share what they sense God calling them to. Pray for each other and commit to continue to do so during the week as people step out in obedience to God’s leading.