

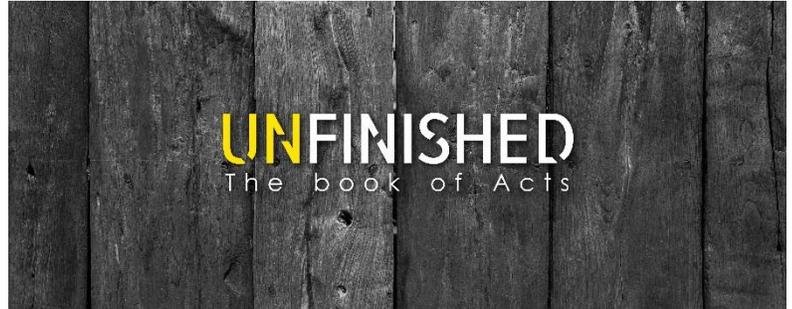


VILLAGE BIBLE CHURCH

SUGAR GROVE CAMPUS

Unfinished

A Real Dynasty—Acts 11:19–30
Tim Badal | April 15, 2018



We're in a series in Acts we're calling "Unfinished." Last week we learned that Peter had taken some heat for taking the gospel to a new group of people—the Gentiles—who had not heard the gospel before. We read about the conversion of a single family, that of the Roman centurion Cornelius. They came to know Jesus and were filled with the Holy Spirit, something that had never happened before.

The Jewish people in Jerusalem had assumed that salvation was only for people of Jewish descent or who became Jewish by adopting all the Jewish customs and traditions. Peter's experience brought them to realize that the gospel was not just for the Jews but also for the Gentiles. Most of us are here because the early church reached out not only to the Jewish nation but to all the nations with the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Today we're going to see something even bigger than what took place in Cornelius' home. The gospel is going to be taken beyond Judea and Samaria, now reaching to the uttermost parts of the world. We'll be moving to a city called Antioch to see what God was doing there, and we'll see how God used what He was doing in this city to change the world—and to change the world in our day as well.

Let's turn to Acts 11:19–30. After we read this, I'm going to help us draw seven principles from the story of this church and apply them to our lives today.

¹⁹ Now those who were scattered because of the persecution that arose over Stephen traveled as far as Phoenicia and Cyprus and Antioch, speaking the word to no one except Jews. ²⁰ But there were some of them, men of Cyprus and Cyrene, who on coming to Antioch spoke to the Hellenists also, preaching the Lord Jesus. ²¹ And the hand of the Lord was with them, and a great number who believed turned to the Lord. ²² The report of this came to the ears of the church in Jerusalem, and they sent Barnabas to Antioch. ²³ When he came and saw the grace of God, he was glad, and he exhorted them all to remain faithful to the Lord with steadfast purpose, ²⁴ for he was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and of faith. And a great many people were added to the Lord. ²⁵ So Barnabas went to Tarsus to look for Saul, ²⁶ and when he had found him, he brought him to Antioch. For a whole year they met with the church and taught a great many people. And in Antioch the disciples were first called Christians.

²⁷ Now in these days prophets came down from Jerusalem to Antioch. ²⁸ And one of them named Agabus stood up and foretold by the Spirit that there would be a great famine over all the world (this took place in the days of Claudius). ²⁹ So the disciples determined, everyone according to his ability, to send relief to the brothers living in Judea. ³⁰ And they did so, sending it to the elders by the hand of Barnabas and Saul.

I love sports, and I love sports talk radio. Usually when it's a down time in the year, sports talk will come up with all kinds of discussion points. One of these that will inevitably come up in the sports talk world is who the greatest athletes are in some particular sport. People will gravitate to the person closest to them. For example, when I ask you, "Who is the greatest basketball player?" our answer here in Chicago is Michael Jordan. We hear the name LeBron or Kobe, and we scoff. It's Michael Jordan. We'll do that with football or hockey or baseball as well.

But an even more interesting discussion than one about the greatest player—because that can be subjective—is what are some of the greatest teams that have ever played? What teams have superseded all their competition? We have them in each sport. In the '60s, the Packers ruled the world—as much as I hate to say that. In the last ten years in football the Patriots seem to own the Super Bowl, year after year.

We were excited in the 1990s when Michael Jordan and the Chicago Bulls won six championships. We saw it with the Edmonton Oilers. In some ways, we see it with our present-day Chicago Blackhawks, who have won numerous Stanley Cups. I could go on and on. Then of course when you talk baseball, it's not the Sox, it's not the Cubs—it's the Yankees. They've got something like 30 championships. But as we learned in 2005, any group of nobodies can win a World Series. Amen? We can just close in prayer.

The teams that are set apart show success over and over and over again. The term that's used for this sort of team is "dynasty." They're sports dynasties—teams that succeed in ways that all of them dream about but few accomplish. One thing that characterizes a dynasty is that everyone else wants to do what you're doing. They want to coach like you coach. They want to run the plays like you run the plays. They want to draft players like you draft players. The other teams model themselves after that one particular team.

Today we'll see how the church at Antioch was a dynasty. It's a church that showed great success. So not only for a short time, but actually for decades, generations, and even centuries, churches have modeled themselves after this church. They use the church at Antioch to evaluate whether they're doing things right. This is something we at Village Bible Church do as well. We want to be like the church at Antioch. We want to evangelize like they did. We want to love the Lord as they did. Their church is an example of how we should do church.

So today we'll look at seven reasons that the church at Antioch can be considered a dynasty, and we'll talk about ways we might be able to follow in their footsteps. But before we think we can just check these things off a list, I want to remind us of something.

Even though these seven things are definitely needed in our church, we should actually focus on something we read in Acts 11:21: *"And the hand of the Lord was with them."* Antioch was never known for its programs. It wasn't known for its buildings or its celebrity pastors. Rather, as Luke points out, Antioch's primary asset was that God was with them. Village Bible Church, and you and I as individuals, will accomplish nothing in this world—no matter how good or noble our pursuits might be—unless the hand of the Lord is with us.

We need to start every day by praying, "Lord, may Your hand be upon me. May Your words be on my lips. May the mind of Christ be my mind." If these things aren't true, then as Jesus reminds us, apart from Him we can do nothing. The church of Antioch reveled in the fact that God's presence and power were with them. This should be our reality as well, so we might serve and honor Him.

Let's see what we can learn about this church in Antioch. How did the Christians get there from Jerusalem? Notice in verse 19, *"Now those who were scattered because of the persecution that arose over Stephen traveled as far as Phoenicia and Cyprus and Antioch."* Where is Antioch located? About 11 hours north of Jerusalem (if we were to travel there today by car). There isn't a present-day city with that name, but it's right on the border of Syria and Turkey

As we read, the Christians went to Antioch to escape the persecution in Jerusalem that had begun with the stoning of Stephen. In Acts 8:1, we're told that Saul of Tarsus approved the execution of Stephen: *"There arose on that day a great persecution against the church in Jerusalem, and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria."*

Over time, the Christians moved even further from Jerusalem. Antioch was a city of about 300,000 people and was built by one of the generals of Alexander the Great. Alexander had given four of his top generals "retirement gifts" that consisted of money and land to build cities.

We're told that people who came to Antioch were in awe of what they found. It had expensive infrastructures. Their streets and buildings were breathtaking. Many would liken it to a New York City, rising up from the edge of the sea to become a great metropolitan city. It was the third largest city in the Roman Empire because of its central location for travelers.

It was also a major trade route. As a port city, goods could be carried from countries in the near east to northern Africa or even northern Europe because of the open waterways. No doubt it was also an attractive place for refugees because there was great wealth and opportunity available there.

Nevertheless, as we might expect, it was a place of great debauchery and hedonism. The temple of Daphne was there. It was a place where Roman aristocrats often retired. They retired to play golf or bingo or whatever retired people did back then. They went there to sow their wild oats with all the available pleasures and perversions. So while Antioch had a lot to offer the refugees from Jerusalem, temptation was also huge. If you think about it, this was an odd place for a church to take root.



Think of the irony in Luke's story. People left Jerusalem in chapter eight because a man named Saul was hunting them down and trying to eradicate Christianity. Perhaps the devil was rejoicing in this man who was working so hard to destroy the spirit of the Christians in Jerusalem. We know Saul was there when Stephen was executed, and he may have had a part in other executions as well.

So just like we would, the people began to run for their lives. The devil must have been really pleased by what appeared to be the destruction of Christianity. People who are afraid and running for their lives would probably not be interested in sharing a gospel that caused so much distress. But it was God Who had the last laugh: He decided to save Saul on the road to Damascus. Then He decided to do a "touchdown dance" in front of the devil. This very man Saul—who was the reason the people were running for their lives, travelling for two weeks from Jerusalem to find a safer place—was the man God decided to make the pastor in Antioch. You can't make this stuff up! This is crazy. But the people in Antioch came to love Paul.

Once again, what the devil intended for ruin, God used for His purposes. God wanted to establish a church in Antioch, and it was the devil's persecution that drove them there. "Thanks, Satan. You're helping Me defeat you."

The church began to grow so quickly that Barnabas was sent from Jerusalem; he then went to get Saul from Tarsus. For a year the two of them ministered to the believers in Antioch. And the people were so on fire for Jesus that for the first time, Christ-followers were called "Christians." At first the name was an attempt to be derogatory, those "Christ folks" or "Jesus people." But now it's a name that those who bear it do so proudly. We are followers of the one true King, Jesus Christ.

So let's look at seven characteristics of this church that operated with "*the hand of the Lord upon them.*" If we want to be like them—if we want to be used like God used the church in Antioch—then we need to see what that will involve.

Creating our own church dynasty for God involves having ordinary people do outrageous things for God.

Let's go back to Acts 11:19: "*Now those who were scattered because of the persecution that arose over Stephen traveled as far as Phoenicia and Cyprus and Antioch.*" These are people who weren't named, either here or in chapter eight. We know some of the names of the ones who stayed in Jerusalem, including the apostles. But it wasn't Peter, James and John who would be starting this new church. These were people who weren't of great significance.

They were regular, everyday folks, like you and me. We don't have thousands of people following us on Facebook or Twitter. People aren't following us with cameras because we're important. When people see us in the grocery store or at school or at work, nobody really cares that we're there. We're just ordinary people.

The amazing church that Antioch produced was not built on a celebrity pastor or some big-name author. It was built on the backs of ordinary people whose names we'll never know. But remember, God does some of His best work through ordinary people. In fact, we'll soon be taking a break from Acts to do a series called "Heroes" from Hebrews 11. Over the summer, we'll see various individuals, most of whom were not well known. They were ordinary people God used to do extraordinary things.

In Antioch, God used people who had no real fame or notoriety; they had traveled 300 miles just to save their lives. But as soon as they reached Antioch as refugees, they began to proclaim the gospel. That's pretty outrageous. They'd left their homes, families, jobs and most of their possessions. There weren't moving trucks to help them with this transition. The last thing you might think they would do would be to start up a new church. They left because they were being hunted down for being followers of Jesus. Why would they start doing in this new place the very thing that got them kicked out of their former place? What an outrageous thing to do!

But they were so sold out for the gospel it didn't matter what circumstances they were in or where they were. They could not stop proclaiming Christ. Today, we too need ordinary people doing outrageous things. We need people who will do things for God that cause others to say, "That's strange. Why would you do that? Why would you give up this opportunity to pursue something for God? Why would you give your money away?" Why will we do things the world can't understand? It's because we serve an awesome God.

The people in Antioch knew that. They did not consider what they did outrageous in light of all God had done for them. They knew, "If God is for us, who can be against us?" (Romans 8:31). They started proclaiming Christ and they built a church.

Creating our own church dynasty for God involves seeing suffering as an opportunity to shine.

Remember, these people scattered from Jerusalem precisely because of persecution. They had been living in peace, going about their jobs and doing life with their families. They didn't see it coming, but at some point someone started banging on their doors or breaking in, grabbing their families or at least taking Dad away. They took their possessions in an effort to frighten them to stop preaching about Jesus.

From a human standpoint, it would be totally understandable for these people to run away and then find a place where they could live quietly without being in danger. In short, they could adopt a "bunker" mentality. They might have decided to just live quietly without ruffling any feathers. They knew what being open about their faith in Jesus had cost them—and they might have thought it wasn't worth losing their father or their children, or at least losing their jobs or homes or possessions. Being open about their faith had not gone well—it had turned them into refugees. But that's not how these people thought. They did not see the loss of home or jobs or even friends and family members—and all that forced them to move far from where they lived—as being a real problem. Rather, they saw it as an opportunity.

We need to see things that way as well. In our comfort, we need to realize that God has purposes in sufferings. What we need to understand is that in the middle of suffering, our light can shine much more clearly than when we are comfortable. As a church and as individuals, God will bring suffering into our lives—things that might not make any sense to us, problems that appear to be designed to trip us up—not because He wants us to become shell-shocked and retreat, but so we might use those very things as opportunities to spread the word about Jesus Christ. I've seen this take place in our church community. There have been medical reports that should have been demoralizing but have instead caused people to praise God. Lay-offs and financial lows have allowed people to shine by trusting God for their daily bread.

One of the greatest examples I've seen was in my own home growing up. I've shared this before, but when I was 14 years old, my older brother died in a car accident. He was 16, a senior in high school. He died on September 17, 1990. It was a beautiful day, a day we'd all love to have right now—sunny and warm. We got the news that Chris had died and we had to do some really hard things, like identifying his body. We had just been to the morgue at Mercy Hospital and we were heading home, along with some church people. My thoughts were all over the place. My parents had been incredibly faithful to God, but I started thinking surely this tragedy would cause them to curse Him. What kind of God would allow some of His most devout followers to be hurt this badly? As I wrestled with these thoughts, I wondered when my parents would break.

We reached the country road where we lived and approached the house three doors down where my brother's best friend lived. In front of his home, and along both sides of the road, dozens and dozens of cars were lined up. It then dawned on us that many of the students who had gotten word that Chris had died showed up in our neighborhood. About a hundred students were holding a small vigil at our neighbor's house. I later learned they had released the entire senior class.

You need to know that my dad and mom are ordinary people. My dad said to me, "Tim, I want you to go over to Brandon's house, and I want you to tell those kids to come to our house." "Why? Dad, you just lost your son. You've just seen his lifeless body. What are you going to do?" But he insisted that I go to get them.

So I went over to Brandon's house, where everyone there was crying and trying to process what had happened. I said to them, "My parents want you to come down to our house." They began to make the trek, gathering in the front yard of our home, with my parents standing on the porch. I can remember it like it was yesterday. My dad—a guy who owned a grocery store—started to preach Christ to a bunch of kids. He started telling them that Chris loved Jesus, and that Jesus was his life and our life. That day, over a dozen kids came to accept Jesus as their Savior.

After they left, I said to him, "Dad, you should be grieving." He responded, "How can we grieve, when heaven is having a party?" If suffering had never come into our home, if God hadn't taken Chris, we would never have had the entire senior class in our front yard. What was deeply painful was also an opportunity for Jesus to shine. Those students are still walking with the Lord.

From an earthly perspective, God had ruined the lives of the people who had fled to Antioch. Remember how Job's wife had told him to "curse God and die"? It seemed that the suffering he was enduring made life not worth living. But we who are Christians need to recognize that "God works all things out for the good of those who love Him and are called according to His purpose" (Romans 8:28). When suffering comes, Christians, "My calling is not to become shell-shocked. I am to share the good news of Christ—whether in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria or Antioch."

God may be creating an opportunity for you and me to suffer in order that we might shine with the gospel of Jesus Christ. Christians recognize and embrace those opportunities. The suffering of that group in Antioch is the reason we're here today. From that church, other churches were eventually started all over the world.

Creating our own church dynasty for God involves not simply playing church but strategically pointing our community to Christ.

We need ordinary people to do outrageous things, we need to see suffering as an opportunity to shine, and we need to stop simply playing church and start strategically pointing people to Christ. The people in Antioch were ordinary, no-name people who were running for their lives to places like Phoenicia and Cyprus and Antioch—anywhere they could land safely. That's what refugees do. Many of those refugees found their way to Antioch where they could have just found each other and done church together. That's where they started. We read in verse 19 that they began to bring the Word only to the Jews. They started with people who were like them and who understood their traditions. These people knew the same songs and could pray the same prayers. At first, they weren't on the offense, but on the defense. "It's us four and no more." But some also began speaking about Jesus to the Hellenists, people who were much different from them.

Like these people, we live in a world of debauchery and sin. It's easy for us to isolate ourselves from this kind of world, to see ourselves as in the world only in body but not in spirit. We might go to work for a paycheck or to school for an education. We live in a community because we have to live somewhere. But as Christians, God calls us to more than this. He wants us to engage the world.

The Christians in Antioch chose not to avoid their world, but instead they preached Christ. Instead of focusing inward, they were looking outward. Instead of thinking about their own comfort, they were concerned for the salvation of others. Our first thought might be, "Well, but they were in Acts. It was different." Yet we see in the text no mention of miracles in this church. No speaking in tongues or other supernatural gifts. These were ordinary people doing what you and I in the 21st century can also do: they preached Christ. What happened? Many came to know Jesus.

So if we see our workplaces, communities, families and friends as a harvest field, then our conversations, our work ethic, our very existence as followers of Christ will look so much different than just going through the motions of living. If we are faithful in this, people will be changed.

This last week I endured a terrible baseball game in the rain. I was talking with a man about things of the Lord, telling him what God was teaching me. He came to our first service this morning and at the end of that service, he ran up to podium. He told me, "Something is happening! Tim, I'm not there yet, but something is happening."

If we're true to the gospel, some people may hate our guts. But there will be some who will come and who will trust in Jesus when we preach Christ. Don't simply play church. There are times when we just go through the motions, but Village Bible Church does not exist for your comfort, or my comfort, but for the Great Commission.

Remember, we are more the church out there than we are in here. We are called to leave this place fired up to go and be the church in all the places where God has called us to be. We need to start thinking about the places where God has strategically placed us, believing He has us there for a reason. We're there for our friends, our neighbors, our school, our workplace. We're there to be a light in a world of darkness.

Remember, those people left Jerusalem because of real persecution. Antioch was not simply playing church—they were strategically reaching their community for Christ.

Creating our own church dynasty for God involves not just getting bigger but growing deeper.

Our next observation is that the church in Antioch wasn't simply getting bigger, they were growing deeper. Three times in our text Luke mentions numbers. In verse 21 he says, "a great number." In verses 23 and 25 he says, "a great many people." There are some who might conclude the church in Antioch was on fire because they were growing. There are people who gauge the health of a church simply by its growth.

You'll find a lot of books in the stores or speakers on Christian radio who speak about what's called the "church growth movement." The assumption is that if a church is growing larger, it's getting better. But that's wrong. There are a lot of really big churches today that aren't really doing anything for the Lord.

On the other hand, there are those who say numbers indicate something is wrong. The truths of the faith have been watered down until anyone can accept them. Or the church has so accommodated the culture that it becomes more like the world than like a church defined by the Scriptures.

Then there are those people who prefer small, intimate groups. They might not say that, but if their church does get large, they'll make comments like, "This church doesn't have the feel it used to have." Or they may complain that they no longer know everyone in their congregation. If this kind of thinking goes too far, the implication is that they should lock the doors at a certain point so no one else will come in. In other words, "It's about our comfort, the feelings we have and our ability to know everyone in the room. We're grateful to have gotten there in the early days, but now we want our church to be left as it is."

A far better perspective is to look at all those who are outside and see in that the wonderful opportunity for God's Kingdom to grow. So either pendulum swing—toward growth for the sake of growth, or small for the sake of small—is wrong in itself. Luke mentions large numbers and we can conclude that this was a positive statement that God intended us to know about. Over and over again, Acts mentions numbers, such as "3,000 were added," or "many were added to their number."

God's concern is not for numbers alone. Rather than simply adding up decisions for Christ, we need to see if discipleship is taking place. The church at Antioch was growing so quickly that the apostles in Jerusalem knew they needed someone to instruct them. So they sent Barnabas, who later brought in Saul to help him.

I would have loved to have been there on that candidating Sunday. "The elders have talked, and along with Barnabas we've made the decision that we're bringing in Saul of Tarsus. Some of you lost family members because of this guy. Some of you left your homes because of this guy. He's going to be our new pastor."

Acts 11:25–26, *"So Barnabas went to Tarsus to look for Saul, and when he had found him, he brought him to Antioch. For a whole year they met with the church and taught many people."* What was the result of their teaching? One result was that the people began to be called "Christians" by those in their community. It wasn't intended to be a compliment, but the church welcomed the label as being true. They were in fact "Christ folks," or "Jesus people." It meant they were living so much like Jesus that they had come to be identified with Him.

Our church has grown a great deal during my years as your pastor. That might be concerning to some—and it sometimes is to me as well. More people = more problems. I have yet to welcome in a perfect person. I've been watching for them—someone with no problems, no sin, no issues. But more and more sinners like myself keep coming. Growth can cause us to struggle.

We have definitely grown numerically since we started. At one point we cordoned off certain pews, because we didn't have that many in attendance. Now we've had to add chairs in the back and have expanded to more services. We have even added more campuses. My goodness—God has grown us a lot!

We might be tempted to congratulate ourselves for this—or we might think, "Wow, we now have our work cut out for us. God has brought so many people who need to grow in the grace and knowledge of Jesus Christ." That's why our mission statement is to discover disciples—not just to discover a crowd. Anybody can get a crowd. We want to develop disciples in the grace and knowledge of Jesus Christ. So in all our ministries, from the youngest to the oldest, we are teaching and training so people can become authentic "Christ folks." So they'll look and sound like Jesus.

That means people must turn to God (verse 21). They must change the way they come into this place—and they are. It's sometimes hard in a growing church to get the stories out there. One of our focuses in the future is to make the stories of life changes more and more available to you. I know in a larger church you often miss these stories. You need to know that lives are being changed and that people are growing in ways we never could have imagined.

Creating our own church dynasty for God involves releasing people so reproduction can take place.

The next observation we can draw from our text is that a healthy church releases people so reproduction can take place. First, let's go back to the church in Jerusalem in verse 22. The church in Jerusalem got the report regarding what was happening in Antioch, so they sent Barnabas to help the new church.

If we aren't thinking, we might picture him jumping on a train and heading north. Wrong. He's gone and he's gone for good. The Jerusalem church told him goodbye, realizing they couldn't contact him by Facebook or do FaceTime with him. There would be no phone calls. He was leaving them to go to another church. It was a real goodbye.

From Barnabas' point of view, he was leaving a familiar and successful church to become part of a fledgling church. He's heard some good things about them, but he really doesn't know what he'll find when he gets there. From the point of view of the people who stayed in Jerusalem, they were giving up one of their best leaders—and for that matter, one of their biggest givers.

Back in Acts 4, Barnabas had sold a piece of property and gave the proceeds to the apostles. He was a generous man who was also known as a great encourager. But Jerusalem was willing, for the sake of the gospel, to send out one of the best of the best. They were willing to decrease so the Kingdom could increase. From a human perspective, they gave up a lot.

This is why I love Village Bible Church. It could have been easy for us to create a bigger church right here in Sugar Grove; instead we've released our people in three ways:

1. We've released them to ministry. As our church continues to grow, we haven't been focused on making a name for the Sugar Grove campus. Rather, we've sent some of our best and brightest leaders off to other campuses. We just did that recently. We just sent off Pastor Steve. He's not the first. We also sent off Pastor David and Emily to our Aurora campus. We sent Pastor Phil to our Indian Creek campus. We sent Jacob Hayes and Jenny out to Plano. We are sending leaders. Young and old, we're sending leaders out. Even though we would love to have kept them here, we knew the gospel was bigger than Sugar Grove. That's what this whole adoption ministry is about for churches. We can't just keep everything here. We have to do what the church in Jerusalem and Antioch did—release our people.

Think about it this way: Jerusalem started their second campus in Antioch. Same leadership, same mission, same direction, interchangeability of leaders. You don't see that in local churches that stay to themselves. You see that in multi-site churches like Village Bible Church, where we're sending our people into new missional outposts to do the work of the Lord.

It can be hard on the church that sends, but what it communicates is that we realize we're not the only show in town. There's other ministry going on; there are other people who need to be reached.

2. We've released them to missions. If you've never done this, examine our missions program. Almost 25% of our offerings, one way or another, is released to other places outside of the Sugar Grove campus. So you have a vested interest because your money is going to other places. If you look at our mission wall, or visit the mission page on our website, you'll see that what we're reading about in Acts is true for Village Bible Church as well.

Talk about ordinary people doing outrageous things! There have been people just like you who in previous years were sitting in the same pews you're sitting in, who have had the outrageous thought that they could walk away from the comfort of this place and go to the uttermost places in the world for the sake of Christ. When this happens, we have released those people to go to the ends of the earth and preach—not just to the Fox Valley area, where we can still see them or have lunch with them. These are Village Bible Church people who have become missionaries.

We've seen it with Chad and Julie Reeser in Spain. We've seen it with Leighton and Jennie Helwig in the Philippines. We've seen it with Lisa O'Brien in Uganda and Megan Kirkland, who now is Megan Rowland, in Alaska. Many of our missionaries were sitting where you are sitting today, then through a message, fellowship or some other way, God worked in their hearts and called them to something greater. We want to release them to go and do that work.

3. We've released them to moving. I just read an article that said 39,000 people left Illinois in 2017. They went to places like Texas, North Carolina, Georgia or Tennessee, where it's always sunny and nice; where taxes are low. We can go on and on. Right? We resent those people on Facebook because they leave us, then they show us pictures of 70-degree days in February. "Nana nana boo boo, we live in paradise. Most of our governors are not in prison where we live. We pay more on our mortgage than we do on our taxes." But I digress.

As a pastor, I'm aware that we have lost more people to moving than to anything else in this church. In the last two weeks I've heard from four of our regular attending families, who've said, "Tim, we're in the midst of transition." I just want to cry in front of them. It's so sad. I feel at times like a parent who invests 18 years in a kid's life, then the kid takes off. After all I've invested I'll only be able to watch from a distance what happens to that investment. I've struggled with this, because there's nothing I can do about it. These people have been transitioned for one reason or another. Then on Thursday, I was looking through this text and God hit

me right between the eyes. “Pastor, your job isn’t to keep them. Your job is to release them. So now grow them, but you’re not to worry about where I put them.”

So we minister to them while they’re here, but what God knows is needed in Tennessee or Georgia or Texas is someone to encourage a church. Or maybe there’s a pastor there who needs to be ministered to. Maybe there’s a community that doesn’t have a gospel presence. God may be saying, “You guys have things under control here in Sugar Grove and now you need to release a few people—even if it’s by moving.”

When a job or family situation causes someone to leave us, we should send them off with the understanding that it’s not just a job transfer—it’s the strategic positioning by God Himself of these believers to win another place with the gospel of Jesus Christ. We should rejoice in that, not grow sad because our friends are now farther away. So we have to be a church that releases our people to ministry, missions and moving—and that can be a very uncomfortable thing to do.

Creating our own church dynasty for God involves encouraging each other to endure.

Our next observation from this text is that we must be encouraging each other to endure. In verse 23, Barnabas shows up. I think the church in Antioch could have been thinking, “This is upper management. They’re coming to evaluate us. They’re coming to inspect us.” But Barnabas doesn’t do these things. It says, *“When he came and saw the grace of God, he was glad, and he exhorted them all to remain faithful to the Lord with steadfast purpose.”* I can assure you that the church in Antioch wasn’t doing everything the same way the church in Jerusalem was. For one thing, this was a church full of Gentiles, whereas the Jerusalem church was primarily Jewish. So Barnabas could easily have let these differences concern him, but he chose to see God’s grace in these people.

This should remind us to look for the grace of God at work in others and not let our personal prejudices and preferences get in the way. The text says he “exhorted them,” which means he strongly encouraged them. What was he encouraging them to do? He wanted them to remain faithful to the Lord. Remember, these people were struggling with many hardships.

Some of you here are struggling with hardships in your own lives. When you come to church, you don’t need to hear, “I’m okay, you’re okay, we’re all okay.” Rather, we need to hear that it’s hard to be a Christian. It’s hard to be a follower of Christ in a world of temptation and sin. What you need from the leadership and in your small groups is the encouragement to keep fighting the good fight and running the race (1 Timothy 6:12). We need each other’s encouragement, because it is easy to give up and not endure.

Creating our own church dynasty for God involves aggressively pursuing the spiritual while addressing the temporal.

Verses 27–28 tell us, *“Now in these days prophets came down from Jerusalem to Antioch. And one of them named Agabus stood up and foretold by the Spirit that there would be a great famine over all the world (this took place in the days of Claudius).”* The church in Antioch could have put on its blinders and said, “We’re about discipleship. We’re about spiritual things. That’s a temporal problem.”

An individual came to me a couple weeks ago and told me they were really bothered by something that happened in one of our church services. They said, “There was an announcement for people to sign up to run the marathon. That’s dumb.” I agreed—running a marathon is a dumb thing to do. But they continued, “Why in the world would a church that’s so focused on the gospel seek to raise funds for clean water?” This was a person who isn’t very active in our church, so I had the opportunity to speak honestly with him. I said, “Marathons are awesome if they’re done for the glory of God. How much greater is it that we might have Christians among those runners to share the gospel. And third, if our friends in Africa and other places in the world don’t have clean water, they’ll die—and if they die, they’ll go to hell. If clean water keeps them alive long enough for the gospel to reach them, then it’s a win-win-win-win-win.”

We need to realize that when we become so overly spiritual that we only focus on preaching Christ, we forget that dead people can’t hear what we preach. We need to minister to physical needs as well. There was a famine in the land and the people made the wise decision to raise money for the others in Judea.

It’s true that if all we do is hand out water to everybody and never talk about Christ, that’s wrong. But when temporal needs come—whether because of hurricanes or tornadoes or famines—we need to do everything in our power to reach out in those ways, because temporal needs produce opportunities for us to also meet spiritual needs of the people around us. Are we the church that Antioch was? Are we like those people in Antioch?

Let me close with something I’ve written from my heart:

"It is a great privilege to serve at this church. I have watched this church in the last 15 years move from a dysfunctional and divided church to a major force, not only in our community but throughout the world. I see on the horizon, as difficult as it may be for us to experience, God expanding this ministry, not reducing it. Lest we be filled with pride or arrogance, lest we look back at all that has been built and say we have done it, let us learn the all-important quality of the church of Antioch: the hand of the Lord was with them.

"We will need that hand of the Lord moving forward. Our impact and reach in this world will only go as far as the hand of God's grace. So let us pray that God will grace us with His presence and power so that we might reach our communities, so that we might reach our schools, so we might reach our workplaces and co-workers, so we might reach our families and friends, producing a ministry that has a lasting legacy not only in the Fox Valley area, but all over the world. That's why we exist. That's why God has saved us, so that we might go on the mission of saving others with the gospel of Jesus Christ."

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All Scriptures quoted directly from the English Standard Version unless otherwise noted.

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