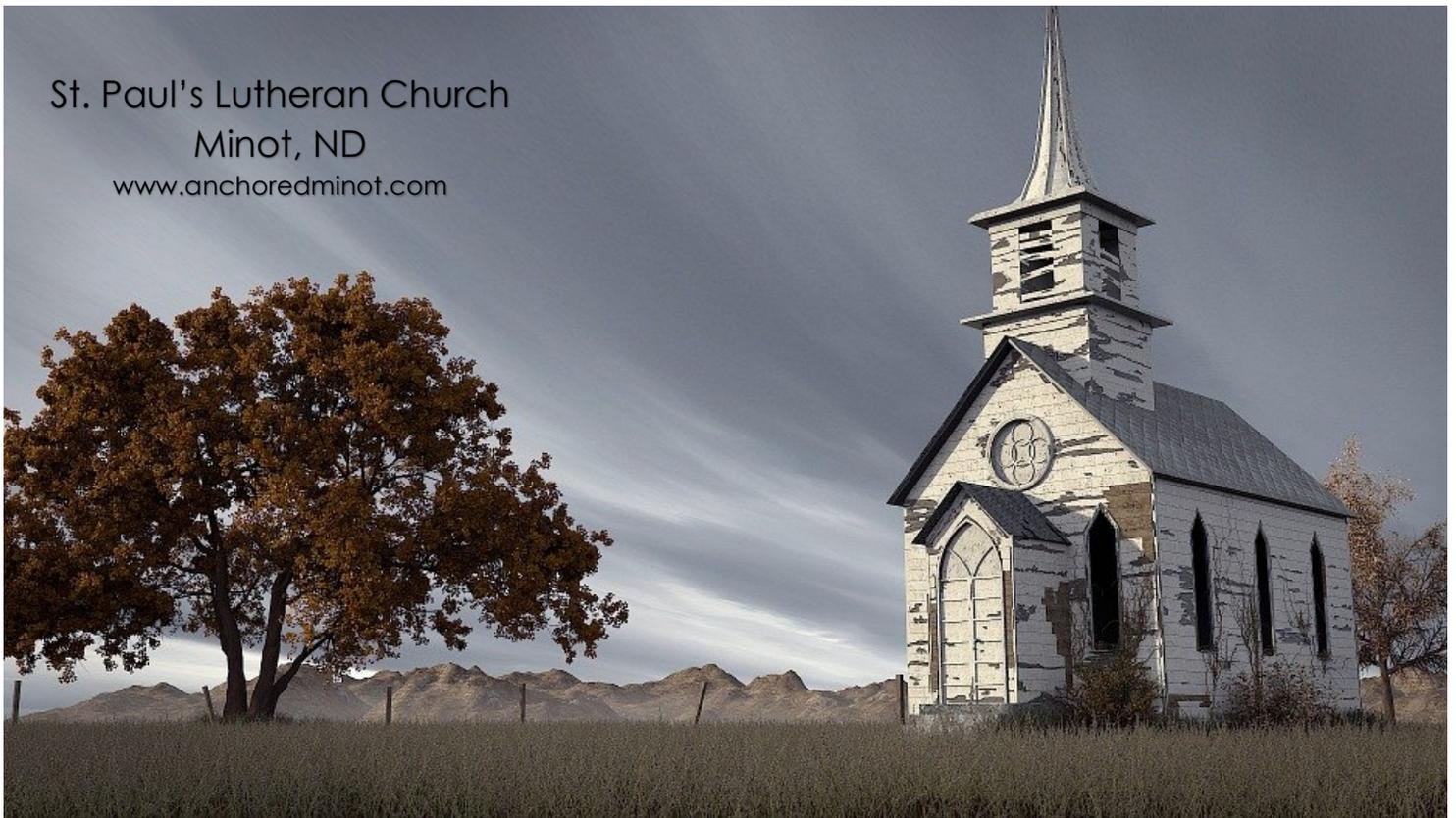


St. Paul's Lutheran Church
Minot, ND
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The Acts of the Apostles

The Ministry of the Gospel in a Messy Church & Conflictive World

Acts 11:1-30

Suffering and persecution are often seen as negative things. However, for the church of Christ? They tend to be tremendous blessings. That is to say, for the Christian faith, things tend to be reversed. Christ dies – sins are forgiven. The spiritually hungry – they are blessed. The church is persecuted – the church grows. Etc.

In chapter 11 of Acts, we see again how persecution caused the exact opposite of its intention – the growth of the church. The church was scattered due to persecution, and as a result, people traveled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus, and Antioch. (*As a way of context, Antioch is about 300 miles north of Jerusalem*). So, to the point; it has been said below that the church functions best when it is wrapped in suffering; conversely though, it does poorly when it is showered with prosperity.

Considering suffering, though, how shall we handle it as a church? How do we handle it as Christians? The old author, C.S. Lewis once said, “I didn’t go to

religion to make me happy. I always knew a bottle of Port would do that. If you want a religion to make you feel really comfortable, I certainly don’t recommend Christianity.”

You see, Christianity is not a religious framework that helps people eliminate suffering altogether but instead, Christianity helps people interpret their suffering from the perspective of Jesus and His cross.

This brings up a very interesting and complex consideration. Jesus told the disciples in Acts 1 that they would be witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and to the ends of the earth. And as we see, in the book of Acts this is being accomplished through suffering and persecutions. And so, does the Lord cause or endorse suffering and persecution upon Christians?

Take a moment and examine Psalm 119, especially verses 67, 71, and 75. What do we make of this? Simply put, there are three sources of affliction: the devil,

mankind, and God. But this is where we must be 'very' careful. You see, it is not as important to know the source of affliction but to know what the affliction (sufferings) serve. As is the case in Psalm 119 – as well as in practical experience – when afflictions come the way of Christians, they drive the Christian to the WORD. "Before I was afflicted, I went astray, but now I keep your word." And, "It is good for me that I was afflicted, that I might learn your statutes." And finally, "I know O Lord that your rules are righteous and that in faithfulness you have afflicted me."

It was stated above that afflictions/sufferings serve. But what do they serve? Afflictions that come to us from the devil, mankind, and God Himself serve three purposes. First, they serve as discipline for the Christian (see Hebrews 12:5-11). Second, they serve as refinement (see James 1:2-4). And finally, they serve the purpose of effective witnessing (see 2 Timothy 1:8-12).

And so, quite often, when we are afflicted and suffer, we want to pinpoint the source of our suffering. Logic says, "Find the source of suffering and eliminate it." While there is some good practical sense to this kind of logic, Christianity is more about comfort in Christ and His gifts in the midst of the suffering. As Christians we know that suffering comes and goes – and sometimes it is here to stay (see 2 Corinthians 12:7). Regardless of the suffering, we do not lose heart. We know that whatever suffering is laid upon us (whether it is from us, our neighbor, God, or the devil) that the suffering will be used for our good and the good of our neighbor. The suffering may discipline us, refine us, or serve as a means of witness to others around us.

Keep in mind that our world does not have an adequate theology and philosophy of suffering. Many prosperity churches do not either. There are two kinds of churches in America. There are churches that have silly gimmicks, pious-sounding formulas, and sappy sentimental phrases that are supposedly used to eliminate suffering from the Christian. They try to take matters of suffering into their own hands. The second kind of church, though, does not attempt to eliminate suffering but helps the Christian understand their suffering according to the cross. They leave the suffering in the Lord's hand while trusting that the suffering serves as the Christian's refinement, discipline, and witness. In the end, the first lives outside the reality of suffering without Christ but the second lives within the reality of suffering with Christ.



