

The Church in Antioch

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Preacher: Kent Dixon

[0 : 0 0] Welcome here for this Sunday, March the 2nd. My name is Kent Dixon. It's my joy to be the pastor here. As an Oilers fan, I do need to tell you there's a new restaurant on Calgary Trail and 51st Avenue called McDavid's.

Check it out. It is McDonald's, but check it out. It's pretty fun. If you're a fan, check it out. Anybody have whiplash from the sudden sidetrack there? So this morning, we're continuing in this sermon series, Acts to All the World.

And through this series, we're exploring the New Testament book of Acts. Pretty self-explanatory. So this morning, our passage is Acts 11, 19 to 30. So feel free to grab a Bible from the pew in front of you.

Open your Bible, turn it on, whatever you need to do, or you can listen as I read. Now, those who had been scattered by the persecution that broke out when Stephen was killed 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.

[1 : 1 5] News of this reached the church in Jerusalem, and they sent Barnabas to Antioch. When he arrived and saw what the grace of God had done, 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 was 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, as each one was able, decided to provide help for the brothers and sisters living in Judea. This they did, sending their gifts to the elders by Barnabas and Saul.

[2 : 2 3] So hopefully you remember from early in our series that after Stephen was martyred by stoning, you probably remember that, the early church at that point became scattered to many regions that were far from Jerusalem.

So the church began in Jerusalem and then was scattered and shattered to some extent by persecution in those early days. And wherever the early followers of Jesus found themselves, they began sharing the gospel.

They were telling people about Jesus. They were doing what they had been commanded to do by their Lord. So the seeds of evangelism had been sown already to some extent.

And last week we considered that when the church accepted Peter's testimony, remember that, Peter was called to Jerusalem to account for his actions, they learned that the gospel was also for Gentiles.

Remember that? It was kind of a paradigm shift in their thinking. But then Christianity exploded into the Gentile areas of that region. And a large number of non-Jewish people became believers.

[3 : 31] Pretty big change for people. Our sermon this morning is titled, The Church in Antioch. And we're going to be considering how, following Peter's accounting for his actions in Jerusalem, the stage was set for a vast expansion of the gospel into regions that were mainly populated by Gentiles.

Now, have you, you hear the name Antioch, it's probably familiar, right? For some of us, it's really familiar, based on what we've studied, maybe Bible studies we've done or things like that.

But as I was preparing this week, I was thinking that name is so familiar and so well known to me-ish, right? So, I wanted to focus a bit more on what was this place all about and why is it important still for us.

So, sometimes we hear sermons about people, or sometimes we hear sermons about events that were significant in the history of the church, history of our faith, and then the lessons that we can learn from them, right?

Or sometimes you hear a sermon that doesn't really feel like a sermon, but then you hear a verse at the end, oh, that must have been a sermon, right? Sometimes that happens too. So, this morning, we're actually going to consider a place that has great significance for us, and we'll see why it's significant.

[4 : 50] The church in Antioch was a significant church in New Testament times. And as we learn in our passage that we just heard, it was started by disciples, by followers of Jesus.

Remember that distinction? Apostles were the twelve, disciples are them, and all of us as well. Anyone who follows Jesus is a disciple. So, that began in Jerusalem.

And then we learn in verse 26 of that passage that it was in this place that the disciples of Christ were first known as Christians. Oh, declare it boldly.

Thank you. I'll give you your five dollars later. So, looking ahead a bit in Acts, and into Antioch's resume, I want to call it, the church in Antioch of Syria would later...

Why is the projector going crazy? Who knows? Welcome to Bramar. So, looking ahead a bit into Acts, into this resume of Antioch, the church in Antioch of Syria would later serve as, some of you will know this, serve as the starting point for Paul's ministry in his three missionary journeys.

[6 : 06] That's a familiar starting point for Paul. And it would be the sending place for Paul and Barnabas to also go to Jerusalem and resolve the issue of circumcision.

And we'll explore that in a few weeks. In our passage this morning, we've been given a bit of a rundown of the beginning of this church. So, let's dig a little deeper. Now, as a former government speechwriter, I would give speeches to people, and when there was a weird word that I didn't want them to stumble on, I would spell it out fanatically.

So, a little secret, I've done that for myself, because I thought I want to pronounce these properly. So, the city of Antioch was founded in 300 BC by a man named Seleucus Nicator.

Easy for him to say. And he was one of Alexander the Great's generals. That's an interesting fact about him. And he named the city, as any good son should do, after his father, Antiochus.

So, Antioch was named after Seleucus Nicator's father. Antioch was located on the River Orontes. And that's 15 miles, roughly 24 kilometers, upstream from the port of Seleucia.

[7 : 24] And you're thinking, well, I can't go there now, Pastor Kent, so why do I need to know this? But who did Seleucus, there we go, Seleucus, who did he name this city after?

Himself, right? Dad, you get the first one, I get the second one. So, the Orontes River, today is known as the Asi, A-S-I, is connected, connected the city to the Mediterranean Sea.

So, it was a city that had a direct connection to international waterways and routes. And today, the city is known as Antakia.

This one I didn't put phonetically. Can you tell? Antakia. And it's just north of the Syrian border, so that's where it's located. And it's located in the Hattay province of southern Turkey, so that's where it is now.

It was always where it is, but now that's how to put it in contemporary context. And over time, the city came to be known as Antioch the Beautiful. It's kind of neat.

[8 : 31] Antioch was famous for its buildings, for its architecture. And it had a long paved boulevard that was flanked by a double colonnade. And several, several weeks ago, lots of weeks ago, early on in this series, we talked about what a colonnade is, right?

It's a row of columns. So, there was a double row of columns along a paved boulevard that was a feature of this city. It had trees and fountains, and it was Antioch the Beautiful.

Antioch was then absorbed by the Roman Empire in 64 BC, and it became the capital of the imperial province of Syria, later Cilicia.

So, if you know a little bit of ancient Roman history, there's maybe some names there. So, the Roman Jewish military and historical... Let's try that again.

The Roman Jewish historian talked about this area, talked about Antioch, and he actually referred to Antioch as being the third city, was what he called it.

[9 : 37] It was the third city of the empire in his mind. This is where it ranked only after Rome and Alexandria. So, Rome and Alexandria were top-tier cities in the empire, and he ranked Antioch as being the third.

So, quite a reputation and a profile for Antioch. So, it's been estimated at its peak that Antioch would have had a very multicultural population of roughly 300,000 people.

Pretty big. And while it was largely a Greek city by origin, for sure, the residents would have also included Latin-speaking people as well.

So, there was a broad cultural background. The city had a large colony of Jews in it as well, and they were attracted by Seleucus' offer of equal citizenship.

So, the Jewish people were given equal citizenship with the Greeks and other people there. There were also people, historians say, from Persia and India and even China who lived in Antioch, called it home.

[10 : 44] And so, that would have contributed to its other name that it was known by, which was the Queen of the East. Antioch, the beautiful Queen of the East.

Pretty neat. So, now we know Antioch. What about the church there? Well, as we've heard this morning, it was established by evangelists. It's a good start.

People who had been scattered by the persecution in Jerusalem, who initially only focused on the Jews. They found themselves in this Antioch region. But then we learn in Acts 11, verse 20, that some of the people from Cyprus and Cyrene began speaking to Hellenists, Greeks, right?

So, this Jewish-only evangelism effort began to spread more broadly. So, then in verse 21 of the passage we heard this morning, we learn that in preaching about the Lord Jesus and with God's hand at work helping them, our passage says, a great number of people believed and turned to the Lord.

God was at work in this place, in this region, through these evangelistic efforts. Who is Barnabas? Good question. I'm glad you asked.

[12:00] Moving to Acts 11, verse 22. We learn that the good news, the news of this new church, got back to the believers in Jerusalem. Remember, last week we talked about good news travels fast, sometimes better than bad news, which is good.

So, they received this news that Antioch, this was going on in Antioch. So, they sent Barnabas. And back in Acts 4, maybe you remember, maybe you don't, we learned that Barnabas was from Cyprus.

So, some of his countrymen, remember people from Cyprus and Cyrene, had already been in the Antioch area preaching. So, some people had already been sharing the gospel. Some of Barnabas' countrymen had been there.

And if you remember, it was Barnabas who bridged the gap for Saul to be introduced to the disciples in Jerusalem. Do you remember that? Paul needed to be introduced to this group.

Everyone was saying, sorry, Saul. See, I just did it. But obviously, all they knew was Saul the persecutor, right? So, Barnabas needed to be the, okay, it's all right, everybody settle down.

[13:07] Saul, everyone, everyone Saul, right? And so, Scripture tells us also that Barnabas' name actually means son of encouragement. I think that's pretty neat.

And it seems like a fitting name for someone who God used to bridge the gap. Someone that bridged the gap first for Saul and then in support of the efforts at Antioch.

So, we learn that when Barnabas arrived in Antioch, the passage says, He saw what the grace of God had done and he was glad. Have you ever been glad when you felt gladness in your heart?

When you realized that God had done something in your life or for someone else? I experience the gladness of God every Sunday morning as I stand at the back and listen and watch.

God is at work. And then, son of encouragement that he was. Our passage also says that Barnabas encouraged them to all remain true to the Lord with all their hearts.

[14:10] What an encouraging influence he was. In verse 24, we get a bit of a concise character study of Barnabas. And we heard that a minute ago. It says that he was a good man.

I've talked before about how watered down the term good is, right? It's become very vanilla. And I think good would have had a much deeper and rich meaning there.

It would have talked about his character, his qualities, his personality probably, all encapsulated in the word good. And it says that he was also full of the Holy Spirit and faith.

So this suggests that he was dedicated and committed. Not only in his personal relationship with God, he was a man who walked with the Lord, but also in trusting God personally.

Trusting in how God wanted to use him. So he was prompted to go to Antioch and he obeyed. And our passage then tells us that a great number of people were brought to the Lord.

[15 : 15] So there really seems to be a perfect storm of people who were engaged in their faith and their calling. And then God was perfectly and powerfully at work, blessing people through his grace.

So having witnessed everything that was happening at Antioch, Barnabas went to get Saul from Tarsus. So this familiar dynamic duo, right?

We see the early days of this. This familiar dynamic duo of the New Testament was forming their bond. But they were beginning to work and serve together in these early days.

Acts 11.25 tells us that working together at Antioch, Barnabas and Saul gathered with the church for a year and taught many people.

Then we read something that was significant for the people at the time, but I think it also remains very significant for us today. It says that at that time in Antioch, the followers of Jesus first came to be known as Christians, the name that we bear to this day.

[16 : 27] That's, of course, not a surprise, right? That term that began, was ascribed then, continues to this day to be used to refer to the followers of Christ.

So this early church, these early Christians came to exemplify, the passage says, good works. Prophets came to Antioch to present God's will to the people and to instruct them in God's word.

We read one of these prophets named Agabus was even led by the Spirit to predict a future famine that would impact the region, that would spread ultimately over the entire Roman world.

So we'll learn even more about Agabus in the weeks ahead. It's worth noting that the people of Antioch were motivated to give generously according to what they were able to give, to help other people.

That was the motivation. And why? Because they sincerely cared about other people. And we read that they gave their gifts to others through Barnabas and Saul.

[17 : 31] So this demonstrates even early how elders were appointed to coordinate meeting the needs of other groups of believers. And I think it also exemplifies this idea of cheerful giving that the Bible commends in 2 Corinthians.

So this morning we've served as witnesses, in many ways, to a significant church in a great city. A church that was established by evangelists from a different country, right?

A church that was encouraged and endorsed by Barnabas, and we can assume the apostles as a whole. A church that was educated and committed to by Barnabas and Saul.

They spent a year with these people, teaching them. And it became a church that exemplified good works. Historians and theologians suggest that aside from Jerusalem in the first century AD, the church in Antioch would have been, likely, the second most influential in Christian history, next to only Jerusalem.

So we'll read more about this church in the book of Acts because it does, as we said, play an important role in Paul's missionary journeys. And it also contributed to the successful resolution of a problem involving Gentiles, as we'll see in the coming weeks.

[18 : 59] The church in Antioch, I believe, has given us so many examples of what it means to be a strong church. One that seeks and submits to the Lord.

One that studies His word together. One that serves other people in our church family, whether we're called to meet the needs of others, here, locally, around the world even, with intentionality and according to our ability.

May we continue to seek God together and be the kind of church that brings glory to Him. Amen. Amen.