

Antioch: The Scattered In The City

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Preacher: Harry Robinson

[0 : 0 0] The thing I like about it best is the little bird down in the right-hand corner saying, Miracle time, Gorby. It always is, but that's a wonderful illustration of the fact that in some cases it particularly is.

And that the dimension, the sort of miraculous dimension of our lives, there's the loaf and there's the fish and there's the multitude and it's time for a miracle.

And our world is very much in that situation. So as a stimulus to praying for our world, that's a good card. Looking then at the second city of the cities we're looking at, this, I can just tell you that it happens like this illustration, which you may not at first realize what it is.

But it's, if I put this in, this, this, and this, you will see that it's a map of the Western Mediterranean. And this is Jerusalem right here, the Sea of Galilee, the Dead Sea, the delta of the Nile River.

And just off here, there's a little island of Crete. And this is just to locate you geographically. Last week I talked about the city of Jerusalem. This time I'm talking about the city of Antioch.

[1 : 4 7] And Antioch was really the capital of the eastern end of the Roman Empire. There were apparently 17 Antiochs.

Two of them are commemorated in the New Testament. This one, which is Antioch in Syria, and another one, which was up here, which was called Pisidian Antioch.

But this is the one we're talking about right here. And it's a very important city. I tried to explain to you last week, to try and treat you to develop for you some sense of the problem of the city, that the city is man's answer to the kingdom of God.

You know, that there is the kingdom of God, but the city is man saying, we will build our own kingdom. And the kingdom that we build is, in a sense, a monument to our own level of achievement.

So that what happens, I remember once seeing a wonderful illustration, which was given by a fellow called Constantinus Doxiadis, who was speaking when the Toronto Daily Star was commemorating their 75th anniversary, or some such thing as that.

[3 : 2 4] And he came and talked to us, and he said something which has always stuck in my mind. He said, cities almost always occur where a river meets the seacoast. And Antioch was such a city, because it was on the Orontes River, and it was only 15 miles in from the Mediterranean.

And cities are inevitably marked by growth of some kind, so that the city gets bigger and bigger and bigger and bigger, and its industry has to grow, and its finances has to grow, and its culture has to grow, and its facilities have to grow, and everything has to get bigger and bigger and bigger and bigger.

And he said, but the difficulty with the city is that relationships between people are the same size. You know, a relationship between a father and a son, it has the same dimensions, no matter how big and important and significant the city may be.

And we get so captivated by the process of growth and development and progress and civilization growing in the city that we tend to lose touch with the fact that we are caught in a relationship which is the same.

And I think that you might say that even in the city, though it gets bigger and bigger, and man becomes more and more important as he relates in a more and more significant way to the city, the fact is that there are dimensions of his life which don't change.

[4 : 59] And I think one of those things that doesn't change is the nature of his relationship to God. What's liable to happen to it is that it gets smaller and smaller to the point where it altogether disappears.

So that what the city gives you that often the country doesn't give you is the option of whether you want to believe in God or not. The city provides you with the right to believe in God, it protects your right to believe in God, it protects your right to worship, it does all those things for you, but it also says, and if you don't want to, you don't have to, which is very convenient because it means that those who consider themselves fairly religious can go ahead believing in God, and those that aren't don't have to.

The difficulty you get is that some gods don't like fitting into that system, and you get into trouble with them because they're not prepared to be, for people to be indifferent to them.

And this is why Christianity generally forms the exception that it's all right to believe in any God you want to, but don't believe in the Christian God because the Christian God tends to be fairly exclusive.

And I think this is what creates problems for Christians a lot of the time. Look then at the text, and you'll see what happened. What happened was that down here in Jerusalem, you got the beginning of the cleavage between Jew and Gentile.

[6 : 38] The Christian community was becoming more and more significant. It had gathered about it a whole lot of people, and the old establishment and the new Christian community, they were beginning to tear apart at the seams, and finally Stephen came along, and Stephen addressed the elders of the community, and as a result he was stoned to death, and so Christians were forced to leave Jerusalem, and they followed, really they followed the commercial routes and went to Alexandria, went up the coast here, and so that very soon afterwards you have the beginnings of a Christian community in Antioch, which is spoken of here.

That the scattered Christians from Jerusalem went to Antioch, and they spoke the word to none except the Jews.

Now Antioch was a Roman city. It was a Greek-speaking city, but they gave, it was a free city.

It once was given to Cleopatra by Mark Anthony just because she needed something by way of a gift, and she was given this city.

But it was quite a famous city because there was just five miles outside it, a great grove of laurel trees, and in the center of the grove was a statue of Apollos, and it was a great center of worship around Apollos, and Daphne, and Daphne was turned into a laurel tree.

[8 : 29] So you have, and that's, I found this out this morning, you'll be glad to know. That's why they used to put laurel wreaths on Olympic heroes. It was a symbol of Daphne, and that's why when you graduate from university, they give you a baccalaureate, you see.

It all relates to this little shrine, which was outside of Antioch. Well, so that in the city, there were Romans, and there were Greeks, and there were Jews.

Now it almost looks as though the ancient world said, we've got to have a Jewish community. The Jewish community bring to the city a kind of morality and ethics which we need as a city.

One of the contemporary descriptions of Antioch at the time was that the one occupation of the people of Antioch was pleasure-seeking, stimulated by the luxurious beauty of the scenery, the mixed population, the voluptuous character of Oriental worship.

Such pleasure-seeking led to disastrous moral result. So that it was a rather healthy thing for a city to have a strong Jewish community in it that dealt with moral issues as the Jewish community does by saying, you know, thou shalt and thou shalt not.

[10 : 05] So they seem to have prospered there, though they had a difficult time. There were four kinds of Jews. There were the Jews who were Jews in the most orthodox sense of the word.

There were Jews who were Hellenistic Jews. That's as short as I could make it. The next kind of Jews were the God-fearing Jews, and these were usually Roman citizens or other people who were attracted by the moral and ethical standards of Judaism so that they were Greek-speaking Jews.

And then beyond that, there were pagans who were right outside. And when they came from Jerusalem to Antioch and they brought the story of the gospel there, at first they spoke only to these people.

And they told them about Jesus because Christianity and Judaism were so locked together, as in the minds of most people, to be quite inseparable.

But then it happened that some people from Cyprus and Cyrene, and you'll be interested to know that Cyrene is way over here in Libya, they came as well, and they started speaking to this group here and to this group here.

[11 : 33] And that's where it says in that passage that the men from Cyprus and Cyrene coming to Antioch spoke to the Greeks also, preaching the Lord Jesus.

Now, I want to come back to that point, but you see, what was happening here was that the gospel was being preached to these people. Jerusalem was totally dominated by the Jews.

And when the gospel was at variance with them, the persecution started, Stephen was stoned, and the Christians had to leave. But the Jews weren't that predominant in this area.

They had already gathered around them a considerable multitude of people who were Greek-speaking Jews or who were these God-fearing people who attached themselves to the synagogue because they admired the ethical and moral teachings of the Jews.

So that they started preaching the gospel of the Lord Jesus to these people. And the result was that the people down in Jerusalem heard about it and sat up and said, hey, what's going on there?

[12 : 45] And they sent Barnabas up to try and regulate the whole situation. But Barnabas, I think, was the wrong man. He was the wrong man. Because if you look at verse 24, he was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and of faith.

And he came up here. And what he saw when he got here, if you again look at the text, he saw the hand of the Lord was upon them.

He saw the grace of God at work among them, that these people were hearing and responding to the preaching of the Lord Jesus.

Now this was going beyond the moral and ethical teaching for which the Jews in Antioch were responsible. This was going one step beyond that and the Jews themselves felt threatened by it.

And this is the beginning of the split between the Jews and the Gentiles in the Christian church. And you see it because one of the most famous citizens, probably the one citizen of this city of Antioch that you all know, is St. Luke, who was born and brought up here as a Greek, probably a member of this group, that he was Greek, but he was attracted to the teaching of the Jews.

[14 : 12] Well, so that he's telling the story of how it happened and how this opposition developed. Now, the difficulty, I think, that you see here right at the beginning of the Christian church, you still see in the Christian church.

And that is, when you preach the Lord Jesus, you begin to get a phenomenon taking place that people no longer want to belong to the church, they no longer want to belong to an institution, they no longer want to be subject to strict ethical and moral standards, they want to live a new kind of life which is a dynamic kind of relationship to God through the person of Jesus Christ.

And their submission is primarily to him as Lord. So, you say to a Christian, who's in charge in your life?

And they say, well, Jesus is in charge in my life. He is Lord. Not some church, not some institution, not someone else, but Jesus is Lord.

And that's what they were preaching. Well, the Jews, of course, said, well, if Jesus is Lord, then what he wants you to do is to be circumcised like the rest of the people of God.

[15 : 34] And that became the great issue that caused the split to take place. Well, what Barnabas did in this situation, because he saw that a whole lot of people were coming to put their faith in Jesus Christ, he went and he got Paul.

And Paul came from Tarsus, which if you can still see any part of this map, is just about here. And Paul came around here and for a year he taught them. In other words, they had come to put their faith in Jesus, but now they needed a year of teaching by Paul and Barnabas, two of the foremost characters in the New Testament, in order to consolidate them.

And so they worked with him for a year, and you see that the result of that was that a large company of people were taught and became disciples of Jesus.

And they were taught what it meant to live with Jesus as Lord in their lives. Now, Paul anticipated the problem that a lot of people who find that liberty in their relationship to Christ use it for their own purposes and not in submission to Christ in the real way.

But these people were taught so that they didn't fall into that. Now, what I want to show you here, this is a... I don't know quite how to do it, but this is one of those fitness world advertisements that you see in the province.

[17 : 22] And there you see him, all muscles, biceps, triceps, and very few concepts. Yeah. Yeah. But you get that picture, you see.

Now, that is very much the picture which I think people have of what humanity is all about.

You see it on every page of every magazine. I'm only picking on Fitness World because it was there this morning when I was looking at the province. And you get this lovely lady and this gorgeous man, and there they are all, all in superb physical condition.

Now, I tell you that because what happens, you see, is that into a city where that would be the ideal, you know, where that would be the ultimate goal of everybody, as you might sometimes think it is for everybody in Vancouver, into that city comes, you know, this preaching of the man who died on the cross.

And you compare that picture with that picture, and you see why the Greeks thought the Christian gospel was foolishness.

[18 : 49] F.F. Bruce says, how could they be expected to accept as deliverer, leader, and lord one who had neither the wisdom nor the power to save himself from such a hideous death?

You know, it just was foolishness to them. They could not understand. And yet, that was, as we're told here, the focus of the Christian message.

They preached to them the Lord Jesus. And a great company of people said, yes, that's it. That I understand.

This I may aspire to, and this I may dream of, and this I might idealize, but this I understand. And they came to put their faith and trust in Jesus Christ.

They identified more with the humiliation of this man than with the prowess that is represented by this. And so, what happened, you see, was that, I'm through, but I just want to give you this one point.

[20 : 06] What happened was that this great company of people started to learn about and live out Jesus as Lord.

So it says that they became disciples. And it says that they taught this company, they were disciples, and for the first time they were called Christians.

And one commentator says that there was a Greek term at the time which referred to crestus.

crestus. And crestus was a worthy fellow. And so that when they were called Christians, it was considered to be something of a name of contempt.

You know, that they didn't call themselves Christians. And I guess Christians still are hesitant about calling themselves Christians. But by the outsider, they were called Christians or these worthy fellows.

[21 : 13] I know the parallel which always appeals to me is that the first division of the British army that went to France in 1940 were so badly trained and badly equipped and badly organized that they were called the old contemptibles.

and they took, ultimately, they took great pride in that name, that they were the old contemptible. So that Christians are given in the same way a name of derision and that is the name that stuck.

And it began here in Antioch. And the reason it began was when the conflict between the sort of Orthodox Jews, the religious, moral, and ethical people on the one hand, and the preaching of Christ on the other hand, the moral and ethical teaching which was of such a high caliber that the wise administrators of the Roman Empire seeded their major cities with communities of free citizens who were Jews.

That was religion on the one hand. On the other hand were the contemptibles, the people who believed in the Lord Jesus. Christians and they were not as reliable and they weren't, at least initially, they weren't as ethical.

But you see how that struggle is still right at the heart. Today, if you go out on the street and ask people what a Christian is, most of them will say that he is a moral, ethical, upright, honest, dealing person, if they feel inclined.

[22 : 55] they may overlook entirely that the reason a person is called a Christian is nothing else than that they've chosen to be a disciple of the contemptible Lord Jesus.

That has been their wisdom, that the world belongs to him, not him. and that that's the position that we're in.

Let me say a prayer and we'll quit. Father, we thank you for the story from the city of Antioch.

We thank you for the great debate that began there and the hammering out in the lives of people what it means to be a Christian.

And that at the heart of it is this personal discipleship to Jesus Christ. And so in our great city here, we ask that there may be opportunity to work out in our lives what it means to be a disciple of Jesus Christ.

[24 : 13] We ask this in his name. Amen.