

**Acts 11:19-30**

**The Church in Antioch**

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<sup>19</sup> Now those who had been scattered by the persecution in connection with Stephen traveled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus and Antioch, telling the message only to Jews. <sup>20</sup> 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. <sup>21</sup> The Lord's hand was with them, and a great number of people believed and turned to the Lord.

<sup>22</sup> News of this reached the ears of the church at Jerusalem, and they sent Barnabas to Antioch. <sup>23</sup> When he arrived and saw the evidence of the grace of God, he was glad and encouraged them all to remain true to the Lord with all their hearts. <sup>24</sup> He was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and faith, and a great number of people were brought to the Lord.

<sup>25</sup> Then Barnabas went to Tarsus to look for Saul, <sup>26</sup> 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.

<sup>27</sup> During this time some prophets came down from Jerusalem to Antioch. <sup>28</sup> One of them, 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.) <sup>29</sup> The disciples, each according to his ability, decided to provide help for the brothers living in Judea. <sup>30</sup> This they did, sending their gift to the elders by Barnabas and Saul.

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**Introduction.**

In Shakespeare's play, Juliet famously asked the question, "What's in a name?" She concluded, "That which we call a rose by any other name would smell just as sweet."

However, names are important, and there are some who suggest that names can even help shape a person's character. I came across a website in doing research for this sermon which invited me to type in my first name, and it proceeded to tell me a number of things about myself which were pretty accurate. For example, the website said, "Your first name of **Peter** creates individuality, independence, initiative, and an inclination to physical activity." All true. I typed in Lorie's name, and the analysis tracked her personality fairly well, too. Can names influence who we are and who we become? Perhaps so.

This morning we read of the time when the followers of Jesus were first called "Christians." It's unclear whether or not the name was used in a derogatory manner, but it is apparent the people of the Way, as they had been called before, were now becoming a distinct entity and were no longer just regarded simply as a sect of Judaism. One of the reasons for this was because Gentiles were coming to Christ in increasing numbers, some without any background in Judaism, and the Gospel was crossing racial barriers as never before. Followers of Jesus were first called Christians in the city of Antioch, and this deserves a closer look.



## I. The City of Antioch and the Founding of the Church There.

Antioch was the perfect city for a crucial change in the work of God and crossing cultural barriers. It was the capital of the Roman province of Syria, and it was known as “the third city of the empire” ranking in prominence only behind Rome and Alexandria. In the years leading up to this time the city experienced tremendous growth, and the population exploded to around half a million people.

Some call Antioch an ancient version of Geneva, Switzerland, because it was a center for diplomatic relations between the empire and its eastern provinces. Consequently, it was a very cosmopolitan city and a melting pot for many nationalities. It also had a significant Jewish population which was large and influential but relatively lax in their observance of Jewish law, and they enjoyed full and equal rights with all the other citizens of the city.

Antioch was not only a center of commerce and diplomatic relations, it was also a city which was known internationally for its immorality. Outside the city there was a park called “the Grove of Apollo,” and it was notorious as a place for sexual indulgence and operated like an outdoor brothel. The name of the city became synonymous with immorality, so much so that many Romans attributed the fall of their empire to the decadent influence of Antioch. It was a “Sodom and Gomorrah” kind of place, sort of like Las Vegas or Amsterdam or Bourbon Street in New Orleans today.

In God’s plan, Antioch was the perfect city to be the place where the Gospel would further cross racial barriers, because it was a multi-cultural, multi-racial community that valued tolerance. Gentiles in the city were unlikely to hold in contempt something that was Jewish in origin, and everyone had a “live and let live” approach to life. Here was an environment that would not hinder the faith, and the atmosphere was an open and inviting one. In the providence of God, the city of Antioch was the place where the Gospel made another dramatic breakthrough, and it crossed cultural and religious barriers again.

We don’t know exactly who established the church in Antioch. All we are told in this passage is that *“... those who had been scattered by the persecution in connection with Stephen traveled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus and Antioch, telling the message only to 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” (11:19,20).*

I love the fact that this cultural and geographical leap of the gospel was led by people whose names we don’t even know! All we’re told is that some anonymous individuals who were forced out of Jerusalem because of persecution didn’t go home to Cyprus and north Africa, but instead decided to head north to Antioch. There they shared their faith, and many people believed. Just like that! God used anonymous believers to accomplish an amazing transformation.

In my former church there was a couple in our congregation who immigrated to the States from Nepal. Krishna and Assa Napit left their country to find a better life here, and along the way they came to faith in Christ. Nepal is a mystical land to many of us. It first came to our attention in 1953 when Sir Edmond Hillary and a Sherpa guide named Tenzing Norgay became the first to scale the earth’s highest mountain. Today it is known as one of the poorest countries in the world, and it has been the focus and attention of many international aid organizations. It is also the world’s only Hindu kingdom, and as such it has stymied most efforts to reach her citizens with the Gospel.

But it is happening. A few years ago, relief workers finally made their way into a remote area in eastern Nepal, and they were the first Westerners ever to visit the area. What they found surprised them. The people there were Christians! To this day no one knows how the message reached this remote corner of the world, but today word is coming out that there is something of a revival going on in eastern Nepal.



No barriers can be erected which cannot be overcome by the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Even Hindu kingdoms are, in the end, subject to the reign of God. It is happening in Nepal, and it also happened in Antioch.

You don't have to go half way around the world to reach internationals for Christ, and you and I have a unique opportunity to influence them for Christ. The world is coming to our country, and the question is will we have open eyes to see them and open arms to welcome them. Last fall, the day after Lorie and I returned from South Africa, she went to HEB to pick up some groceries. What struck her were the many internationals she saw shopping at the store. When she walked down one aisle, she ran into a family who was from India. The next aisle over people were speaking Spanish, and on the third aisle there were a number of Asians shopping for potato chips. It was then she realized, "The world has come to America. There is a mission field right here!"

## **II. The Ministry of Barnabas and Saul.**

It is remarkable the Gospel found its way to Antioch. What is even more remarkable is that the church in Jerusalem gave their blessing to this new development. The leaders in the mother church encouraged what was happening in Antioch, and they sent Barnabas to be their ambassador and check things out. It is striking to me they didn't send Peter or one of the other apostles for this task, and this indicates that early on in the life of the church the apostles were eager to share leadership with others who were also gifted and called by God.

We know something of Barnabas already. We read about him Acts 4 where it says, "*Joseph, a Levite from Cyprus, whom the apostles called Barnabas (which means Son of Encouragement), sold a field he owned and brought the money and put it at the apostles' feet*" (4:36,37).

That passage tells us several things about the man. *His given name was Joseph, and he was Jewish.* In fact, he was a Levite, which means he was a member of the tribe of priests in Judaism, and he helped lead worship. We also learn *he was from Cyprus*, an island in the Mediterranean, and I think it's no accident the apostles sent someone to Antioch who came from one of the same cities the original unnamed evangelists who helped establish the church in Antioch were from. Barnabas would be comfortable in a diverse context, for he knew from his years growing up in Cyprus how to relate to Gentiles. The text also tells us *he was generous*, and he was one of the first to give sacrificially to the work of the Lord. And *he was an encourager*, so much so that the apostles gave him a nickname to acknowledge this special quality about him.

Barnabas lived up to his name, and more. He not only encouraged and supported these new believers, he also sought out someone he knew could help them grow in their knowledge of and love for Christ. Barnabas went looking for Saul, who later became Paul, and he traveled as far as Tarsus to Saul's hometown about 100 miles away. When he found him, Barnabas persuaded Saul to join him in Antioch, and for a year the two of them taught the disciples in that city.

It's important for people to discover the unique ways God has gifted them and then to use those gifts and the passions God puts in their hearts to serve Him the best way they can. Right now, as a part of implementing one of the initiatives of the strategic plan the Session approved last fall, the elders and the officers-elect of our church are taking a test which helps identify their spiritual gifts, personal passions, and unique working style in order to assist them in fulfilling God's call for their lives.

At WHPC we want the right people to be in the right places doing the right things for the right reasons. Folks need to find a place of service which aligns their unique gifts of the Holy Spirit with the deep needs the church and the world around us. Author and pastor Frederick Buechner once said that the call of God is the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet.



We see this happening in our text when Barnabas recruits Saul to use his incredible gifts of knowledge and teaching to build and deepen a fledgling congregation. None of us can do the work by ourselves, and God calls each of us to serve with partners on a team in community. No one individual has all the gifts to do everything, and each of us has a unique part to play in the ministry and mission of Christ.

Do you know how God has gifted you? Do you know what your spiritual gifts are? What are your passions, and how has God uniquely made you to serve him? Are you an encourager like Barnabas, or a teacher like Paul? In the days to come, we will be inviting all the members of our church to engage in this process of self-discovery, and I encourage you to be a part of this initiative so we can all experience the satisfaction that comes from serving God and others and fulfill our calling in Christ.

### **III. A Generous Church.**

The passage also says, almost in passing, that a prophet from Jerusalem named Agabus came to Antioch and predicted that a famine would spread over the Roman world. This actually happened around 46 AD during the reign of Claudius, and the famine was particularly severe in Judea. The striking feature of this story is that disciples in Antioch decided to provide help for their Christian brothers and sisters living in Judea, and they sent a financial gift to the elders.

Here we see the first instance of Christians helping other believers in another part of the world. It is the first example of disaster relief. Earlier in the book of Acts we see generosity expressed between believers in the same church in Jerusalem when they shared what they possessed with anyone as they had need. Barnabas led the way then, and I suspect he was the one who encouraged the Christians in Antioch now to help their brothers and sisters in Judea during this time of famine.

One of the things I love about our church is the heart of compassion and sacrificial giving which characterizes this congregation. I was blown away last December by the Christmas Eve offering – \$94,000 to help Mobile Loaves and Fishes here in Austin and Empact Africa overseas. Our church follows the example of believers in Antioch who first saw a need overseas and rose to meet it.

Many of us have been deeply moved by the earthquake and tsunami which has devastated Japan, and we want to do something about it. I'll be asking the business office of our church to be prepared to receive special gifts to help provide relief and assistance to Christians in Japan who have been devastated by these disasters, and I'll also ask Carol and the Global Mission Committee to identify partners with whom we can work there.

Many of you know that Susan Furman of our congregation is over in Japan right now while her husband Jim remains here in Austin. Susan is a teacher there, and my thoughts have gone to her in this time of crisis. I'm happy to report that yesterday I called Jim, and he was at that very moment talking to Susan on Skype, and I was able to talk to her, too. Susan is okay, though a bit rattled from the whole affair. She lives in Yokohama which is about 200 miles from where the worst of the damage occurred. She is going to talk to the leaders of the church where she worships and see if we can be of any help to those in need in that country who have been affected.

### **Conclusion.**

Believers were first called Christians in Antioch, and the church there was a congregation of many races and different religious backgrounds. Before this time, people who were followers of Christ were called many things – disciples, people of the Way, believers, brothers, and witnesses. However, in Antioch they were called Christians for the first time. The name Christian literally means “one who



belongs to Christ.” What a wonderful description of a follower of Jesus. How will you show you belong to Christ this week?

Fred Craddock teaches at a seminary, and he tells of a time when he and his wife were on vacation in eastern Tennessee eating at the Black Bear Inn. While they were waiting for their meal to arrive, an old man in his 80s came over to their table and said, "Good evening. You on vacation?"

"Yes," the Craddocks replied.

As they talked with the gentleman, the subject of Fred's occupation came up, and when the old man learned that he taught in a seminary, he said, "Oh, you teach preachers! I've got a story about a preacher," and he pulled up a chair.

"The old man said, 'I was born back here in these mountains. My mother was not married, and the reproach that fell upon her, fell upon me. The children at school had a name for me and it hurt very much. During recess I would go hide in the weeds until the bell rang. At lunchtime I took my lunch and ate behind a tree to avoid them. When I went to town with my mother, the people would stare at her, and then they would look at me, too. It was a very painful time.

"I guess I was in the 7th or 8th grade when I started to go hear a preacher. In a way he frightened me, but in another way I was attracted. When he spoke, he thundered. I was afraid people would say, 'What's a boy like you doing in church?' so I would go just in time for the sermon, and then I'd slip out.

"One Sunday, however, some women had the aisle cued up, and I couldn't get out. I began to sweat and I worried, 'Oh, no, somebody's gonna to say to me, 'What's a boy like you doing in church?'

Just then I felt a hand on my shoulder. I looked out of the corner of my eye, and I saw the face of the minister! I thought, 'Oh, no, he's going to guess.' The preacher looked straight at me, and he stared into my face. And then he said, 'Boy, I know who you are, and I know who your father is. You're a child of.... You're a child of.... You're a child of God. And I see a striking resemblance!'

"He patted me on the shoulder and then said, 'Go claim your inheritance, son.'"

At that, the old man got up to leave, and Fred Craddock asked, "What's your name, sir?"

The old man turned and replied, "Ben Hooper."

That old man was Ben Hooper. He served as Governor of the State of Tennessee for two terms.

Realizing that you belong to God and that He is your heavenly Father can change your whole life. Knowing your name, knowing that you are a Christian, that you belong to Christ, makes all the difference.

Question 1 in the Heidelberg Catechism asks, "What is your only comfort in life and in death?" The answer – "That I belong – in body and soul, in life and in death – not to myself but to my faithful Savior Jesus Christ, who at the cost of His own blood has fully paid for all my sins and has completely freed me from the dominion of the devil."

What's in a name? In this case everything! Amen.

