

## Antioch

Acts 11:

March 12, 2006

(Commentary accompanies slide show)

### Title slide

Good morning. My name is Joseph, Joseph Barnabas, but you can just call me Barnabas. Most of my friends do. I was born on the island of Cyprus, but have lived most of my life in Jerusalem. Only lately, I have not been much in Jerusalem. I have been traveling far and wide throughout the lands on the eastern and northern shores of the Great Sea.

I am here today to tell you about one of the places I visited: Antioch on the Orontes, one of the leading cities of the Roman Empire, where I recently spent twelve months. I want to share with you some of my impressions of the city and its people.

### Slide #2

Antioch is a city of great beauty, located in the far northwest corner of the Roman province of Syria, about two weeks journey from Jerusalem. It is a bustling city of some 200,000 residents. It is a cosmopolitan city. People from all over the world have settled there: Greeks, Macedonians, Jews, Syrians, Cypriots, Persians, and even Africans, people from Cyrene and from Egypt.

### Slide #3

It is a beautiful city in a beautiful setting. Antioch straddles the Orontes River, about sixteen miles upriver from the Great Sea, the one you call the Mediterranean. The city is situated in a narrow valley between two mountain ranges. It lies at an important overland crossroads, connecting popular commercial routes, providing access to Palestine to the south, the Euphrates region to the east, and Laodicea to the west.

Antioch is one of the leading cities of the Roman Empire, exceeded in significance only by Alexandria and by Rome itself. Some have called Antioch the "Queen of the East," and some have called her, "Antioch the Glorious."

### Slide #4

They do things "big" in Antioch. This carved rock face sits outside the city. The rock relief depicts Charon, ferryman of the River Styx. He gazes out from the face of the cliff, looking over the city. That's a bit unsettling!

### Slide #5

Antioch is an important center for commerce and for Greek culture. They dominate the ivory trade; they are permitted by Rome to mint their own coins; and they are well known for their beautiful mosaics.

### Slide #6

This mosaic portrays the amphitheater in Antioch, an arena for sporting events, entertainment, and other public gatherings.

### Slide #7

Here is another mosaic depicting the Aristotelian Philosophical Institute in Antioch. They are a well-educated, cultured, and progressive people.

### Slide #8

The sculpture shows the Greek influence on art in Antioch. Antioch is very much a Greek-inspired city, reflected in its art and its drama.

### Slide #9

Here is a beautiful bas relief carved onto the face of a sarcophagus.

### Slide #10

Antioch is a cosmopolitan city, including a variety of ethnic groups and a variety of religious groups among its inhabitants. There were Jews in Antioch from its beginnings, some three hundred years before my time. They are accepted here. Because so many different groups have existed side by side for so long, there is a high level of tolerance for religious diversity.

But Greek culture and religion do take center stage. Five miles outside the city is a shrine dedicated to Daphne, the young woman pursued by Apollo, who was turned into a laurel tree by her father, the river god, to spare her from Apollo's advances.

And Antioch is a place where the Christian church was planted early on and grew rapidly.

### Slide #11

I must tell you that I am not an unbiased observer. I am a Jew, a Jew who has long trusted in the love and mercy of God, believing that God would keep the promises made to my ancestors.

And God has! I have seen it with my own eyes, and I believe! I have heard the stories of Jesus and I believe! Jesus has brought the love of God close to us. Jesus has proclaimed God's forgiveness to us. And Jesus has been raised from death as the sign of God's readiness to make all things new.

I was sent to Antioch by the church in Jerusalem. We heard stories of many new believers in Antioch and I went to see for myself what was happening there and to bring encouragement and support from fellow believers in Jerusalem.

What I saw amazed me. So many believers, Jews and Gentiles, all alike embracing the good news, the good news of peace, the good news of healing for broken bodies and broken souls, the good news of God's victory over the great powers of sin and death. So many new believers, all filled with joy! It filled me with joy to see them!

This is what I told them: *Be faithful and true to the Lord with all your hearts!*

I was so excited by what I saw happening in Antioch that I went on another week's journey to Tarsus to find Saul. I brought him back to Antioch with me and we stayed a year with them, teaching them the stories of God's grace, worshiping the Lord with them, encouraging them and being encouraged by them, sharing their joy.

### Slide #12

It was a wonderful year. There is so much I like about the church in Antioch.

I appreciate their enthusiasm, the eagerness and excitement with which they have embraced the gospel.

I enjoy the diversity of the people brought together by their common faith in the Lord Jesus. Let me illustrate this diversity by naming for you the five leaders of the Antioch church. They are: myself, a Jewish Cypriot; Saul, a trained Pharisee and a former enemy of followers of Jesus; Simeon, a black African; Lucius, another African, from Cyrene; and Manaen, a political insider and friend of Herod Antipas. Quite a group!

The Antioch church is a generous church. When they heard about the famine that threatened all the world, they thought not just of themselves, but of their fellow believers in Jerusalem and Judea. They took up a collection and sent Saul and myself to take the money they had raised to Jerusalem. They share their resources with brothers and sisters in need.

And this church has a strong sense of purpose. The message of the gospel has changed them and brought them joy, and they are eager to share that good news with people they have not even yet met! I would love to take you to Antioch with me, to let you meet with these believers yourself and let them share with you their story, but I am afraid you are about 1960 years too late to do that!

#### Slide #13

Instead, I am here to share their story with you, because, in many ways, you are like them. Waterloo is very much like Antioch, a cosmopolitan city, racially diverse and religiously diverse, a center for commerce and culture and education, situated at an important crossroads, connecting to Minneapolis to the north, to Chicago to the east, and to St. Louis to the south. And your church, like theirs, was founded by people from away!

So I will tell you what I told them: *Be faithful and true to the Lord with all your hearts!* There is nothing more important than this. Be aware of your connection with other followers of Jesus, and find ways to encourage them and support them. Be generous, use the gifts God has given you to bring blessing to folks near and far. Be eager to spread the good news! Someone was good enough to share the story with you, so pass it on!

And be proud of your name. Your name is *Christian*. That's what they are called in Antioch: *Christians*. Not called by the name of their church founders: Lutherans or Wesleyans. Not named after their preferred way of doing things: Methodists or Pentecostals or Baptists. Not called by what outsiders notice about them: Quakers or Shakers. Not named after their location or cultural origins: Roman Catholics or Greek Orthodox. And not named for their style of organization: Presbyterians or congregationalists!

#### Slide #14

Just Christians ... followers of Jesus, the Messiah, the Christ. May you be faithful and true to the Lord with all your hearts! May the Lord bless your church.