

Ordination: The Lord was With Them

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[0 : 0 0] This morning we find ourselves in the second city of the Roman Empire, the city of Antioch. Second only in importance and significance to the city of Rome itself.

This term second city is a familiar term to me as an American. It's one of the nicknames that is given to the city of Chicago. New York, of course, the most significant city in the United States for many different reasons.

Chicago was nicknamed the second city. Last year we had a visit from one of the city to city workers from Redeemer Presbyterian Church in New York City, and they were talking about their strategy for reaching the world through its major cities. Now the major city of the United Kingdom you wouldn't be surprised is the city of London, commerce, industry, finance, government, etc. But when asked what is the second city, the answer wasn't Birmingham, it wasn't Manchester, it wasn't one of the large English cities, but it was the city of Edinburgh. So Edinburgh is the second city in terms of mission.

It's significant for its history, it's significant as a place of government, it's a place of finance, a place of commerce, the home of several world-class universities. So it's a key city.

And we see in the Bible and we see in the present day that there is a clear strategy, that the work of the Gospel is not random, it's not haphazard. Sometimes circumstances overtake the work of the Apostles so that they have to leave one place and go to another, but it's not surprising that Barnabas and later Saul spent so much time in the city of Antioch. And if your ancient Near East geography is not as good as it should be, if you think of the big country of Turkey, you know, in the west side of Turkey you've got Istanbul, you go further to the east, but not all the way to the east, but there's a little bit of Turkey that still juts down into the Mediterranean. That's modern-day Antachia, that's ancient Antioch.

[2 : 1 4] So it's on the Mediterranean, near the Mediterranean, it's now part of modern-day Turkey, and it's not that far away from Tarsus where the Apostle Paul Saul was from. So a key city in the ancient world, a key city in the modern United Kingdom, Edinburgh. So what you are doing as a congregation is absolutely critical, that you are seeking to reach this city with the Gospel, and you have no way of knowing who is part of this city because cities have a way of attracting a wide variety of people from a wide variety of places who may be here for a time and then go back to their homes or to another country.

You might be surprised that I'm not originally from this country, but I came here to study, I stayed to live, to work, and many other people have very similar stories. And for those who are involved in the work of the Gospel, in Edinburgh, in the City of London, in the major cities, will testify that quite literally all of the world comes to the city.

Nations, for example, where the Gospel is barred, where it's not legal to gather, to preach Jesus, to worship Jesus, to share Jesus, these people are coming to this city, coming to work, coming to study, coming to live.

So what you are seeking to do in the City of Edinburgh is strategic, not just for the city, not just for the nation of Scotland, but for the world. And what we're doing here today is we are setting apart one man for a very specific and a very exciting work.

It's a work that involves both partnership and pioneering. Partnership in the Gospel, working together, biblical model, the idea that one person does everything is not found in the Bible, but the idea that the work is shared is very much found in the Bible.

[4 : 13] And there's a pioneering element whereby new work is commenced. Those who are identified with skills, those who are identified with abilities, are set apart by the church, commissioned to go. And the exciting beginnings that we are talking about here is the beginnings of a new work, a new endeavor, a new opportunity of reaching new people with the message of the Gospel.

So we are in the second city of the United Kingdom this morning, and in our Bible reading we are in the second city of the Roman Empire. And I'd like to highlight three very key points from the passage that have obvious relevance for us today.

First is the power, the power that God has. This is seen very clearly when we read in verse 21, and in verse 21, the Lord's hand was with them and a great number of people believed and turned to the Lord.

This idea of the Lord's hand. Now when we think of God, we know that God is spirit, so God literally doesn't have a hand, and yet this image is often used in the Bible to speak of the absolute sovereign power of God.

For example, if you go back into the Old Testament, Exodus chapter 7, one example, could choose several different there, but Exodus chapter 7 at verse 5 we read, and the Egyptians will know that I am the Lord when I stretch out my hand against Egypt and bring the Israelites out of it. So the hand of God demonstrates two things.

[6 : 00] It demonstrates the power of God. It demonstrates his authority over his enemies that he can thwart his enemies, but he can also deliver his people. With the same hand that he judges the Egyptians, he redeems or he rescues the Israelites.

Power in the hand. Now when I was young, and I'm sure many of you, when you think back to your father, my dad was a big man, and my dad was a strong man, and my dad was very adept at carpentry, anything practical he could do and he could do well.

But I have this image in my mind that when he would hammer in a nail, he'd set the nail up, and then he'd take the hammer, he'd use his right hand, he'd take the hammer in his right hand, and he would drive the nail in with one hit.

I've never been able to do that. I either missed the nail, I hit it off center, I've never been able to drive a nail in with one shot. But that's the kind of strength that you can have in your, if you know what you're doing, you can exert a lot of power with your hands.

God knows exactly what he's doing, and he exerts power with his hands so that what he wants to achieve, he always achieves.

[7 : 14] And isn't that the difference between us? We have plans, dreams, hopes, expectations, and many times they simply remain as plans, hopes, dreams, and expectations. When God begins a work, he completes a work.

When God has a plan, he brings that plan into effect. So the Lord's hand was with them. And how do we know that God was with them? Because a great number of people believed and turned to the Lord.

When God is at work, it's obvious. Exodus chapter 7, when God is at work, it's obvious. It's obvious to the Egyptians, it's obvious to the Israelites. When God is at work, it's obvious to the disciples of Jesus, and it's obvious to those roundabout. Something is happening. And this is our prayer, that God's hand would be with us.

With you as a congregation of God's people, with Derek, with Tom, with the elders, with the deacons, the leaders of this church, because without the hand of God, without the power of God, you can have the greatest strategy.

You can have the most detailed objectives. You can have all the wisdom and all the insight. And yet if God is not with us, there is absolutely nothing that we can achieve.

[8 : 39] And notice too, in verse 23, Barnabas comes, and 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.

So here you bring in a third party, somebody that wasn't part of the actual event. And what does Barnabas conclude? Barnabas concludes that the grace of God is evident.

You know the grace of God is evident. You know that God is working when those who are unbelievers believe, when those who are outside come in, when those who are lost are found.

You see, it's not just a change of thinking, it's not just a change of morality, but there's a transformation by the grace of God that people are made alive, made new, reconciled, born again, redeemed, brought into the family of God.

So Barnabas comes, and the only thing that he can conclude is the grace of God is at work, and he then encourages them to remain true to the Lord with all their heart.

[9 : 56] So what do we need today? We need to see God at work. We need to see the evidence of his power. And this is what the Bible continually emphasizes. Paul, Barnabas, great man used of God, but that's exactly what made them great. Not because they were great in and of themselves, but they were used by a great God. It's all about God. It's all about him, his grace, his power, his mercy, his plan, his purpose. But notice too, and this is our second point, the power that God has, and the people that God uses. Now God can do anything he wants, in any way he wants, at any time he wants, with any means he wants, or without means. But what the Bible is so clear on, and what the Book of Acts constantly reminds us, is that God uses people, all kinds of people.

One of the big corporations in the United States is Heinz Corporation, based in Pittsburgh, and it's famous for its food. And back when it was founded over 100 years ago, the founders came up with this tagline, Heinz 57, 57 varieties.

They wanted to make people know that it wasn't just ketchup, it wasn't just tomato soup, that this company could provide all different kinds of food that you could enjoy. And that tagline has continued to this day, Heinz 57, different kinds of food, different kinds of variety.

And when we look at Acts chapter 11, we see that God uses all kinds of people, some that we know their names of, but most that we don't.

Let's look for example at verse 19. Now those who had been scattered by the persecution in connection with Stephen traveled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus, and Antioch, the eastern Mediterranean.

[11 : 56] Now we don't know who Stephen is, but Stephen's dead. The disciples caught up in the midst of persecution flee, and they flee to these areas, but as they flee, they tell. Are they commissioned? Are they set apart?

I mean even Philip himself who you read about in his mission to Samaria, Philip was set apart as a deacon to serve widows, and before you know it, Philip is now the evangelist sharing the gospel.

So you see, there's this command, encouragement, motivation that whoever you are, and wherever you are, and whatever your circumstances are, that there's a responsibility that if you know Jesus, you want to somehow, some way make Jesus known wherever you go.

And you see, this is a crisis time. If you had to flee your home for persecution, which is the reality of many Christians today, you would be thinking of yourself, your health, you'd be thinking of your family, their welfare, you'd be thinking about where you would get food to eat, you'd be thinking about where can we find shelter over our heads, where can we find a bed to sleep.

But these people, wherever they're going, they're telling the message of Jesus. Now in this particular case, they're telling the message to Jewish people, most likely because they are themselves Jewish.

[13 : 26] So there's nothing wrong with finding people that are like you, finding people that might have similar interests, similar backgrounds, and communicating the message of Jesus to them.

But notice that as we think of the 57 varieties, look at verse 20, that there's a message now for all people. Some of them, however, men from Cyprus and Cyrene, Cyprus is in the Med, Cyrene, North Africa, went to Antioch and began to speak to the Greeks also, telling them the good news about the Lord Jesus.

Who are these people in verse 20? What persuaded them or led them to speak to the Greeks? None of these answers are given. And in fact, that's of little note because the Bible tells us that it's not about who you are, it's not about your name or your particular qualifications, though you're important as an individual.

These people are important, but they remain anonymous. What motivated them, what led them to do this? We have no idea, but they began to speak to non-Jewish people, people that were outside of their circle, people that were different from them, different culture, different background.

Maybe they spoke a different language, they had a different way of looking at the world. And that shows to us that the Gospel message is used, affects all different types of people, and leads us not just to speak to our own people, but encourages us to step beyond the comfort zone.

[15 : 00] So if you are accustomed to speak to a certain group of people, maybe you're in your 20s, you've graduated university, you're just starting in your job, it's quite understandable that you would find yourself naturally attracted to other people in similar circumstances, maybe shared interests, and that's quite alright.

But we're told in the Bible that we cannot simply speak to people that are like us, people that we find common interests with, people that speak the same language or from the same culture or from the same background.

So we see these people, and they began to speak to Greeks as well. In verse 22, this story is now spreading.

News reached the ears of the church at Jerusalem, and they sent Barnabas to Antioch. Good choice. Here's an encourager. Here's somebody who can build up these new Christians.

Here's somebody who can take them from where they're at and bring them forward. We're told in Acts chapter 4 that this man called Joseph Elibite from Cyprus called Barnabas, which means son of encouragement.

[16 : 13] Now we see Barnabas in Acts 4, we see Barnabas in Acts chapter 9 with the apostle Saul of Tarsus, and now we see him for a third time in Acts chapter 11.

What are his qualifications? He was a good man full of the Holy Spirit and faith, and the ministry of Barnabas was a blessing to Antioch because after he arrived, a great number of people were brought to the Lord.

So you have the Jews being witnessed to, the Greeks being witnessed to, Barnabas comes, and the church begins to grow even greater. But Barnabas realizes he needs help. He can't do it all on his own.

Even a man, a good man full of the Holy Spirit and faith. What does he do? Verse 25, Barnabas went to Tarsus just a little bit up the road to look for Saul.

Now I don't know if you're like me, but when I read the Bible, you know, when I read Acts chapter 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, you kind of think it's just on a similar timeline.

[17 : 19] This happened and then that happened, and you're kind of dealing with a short space of time. Now you wouldn't necessarily think that the conversion of Paul, the conversion of Saul, and then Saul making an appearance here in Acts chapter 11, maybe 13 years, 14 years. You know, the last time we read of Saul, it's maybe a gap of eight years.

I wouldn't have thought that. Maybe you would have figured that out, but I didn't necessarily figure that out. But you see, Saul has been in Tarsus for about eight years. He's been working in the area of Tarsus, Silicia, and all of a sudden he's brought back into the center of what God is doing.

Barnabas goes and looks for him, finds him, brings him to Antioch, and for a whole year, Barnabas and Saul met with the church and taught great numbers of people.

So what does it say to us? It says that one person can do a great work in the service of God. Two people can do more. Two people with different gifts, different abilities can serve God in a greater capacity than one.

Two are greater than one. So Barnabas has skills and abilities. Saul has skills and abilities, but together they are a powerful team. So what's happening here today in many ways is exceptional within our tradition.

[18 : 43] A church with more than one minister doesn't happen all that often. Not many churches are large enough financially to support the ministry of two people, but it's absolutely critical.

Because Derek can do something. Tom can do something. But together they can do more than either of them could do separately. Each has different skills, each has different aptitudes, and God has given them the same spirit, the same faith, and yet the ability to work together to the same end, but with different skills and different abilities.

So there's the encouragement for us to do what God is calling us to do. To share the gospel, whoever we are, whatever our circumstances, but to recognize that there are certain people, Paul, Barnabas, who have particular skills that single them out for a particular service.

The ability to encourage and the ability to teach. Barnabas could take them so far, but Saul could take them further. And we're told that the disciples were called Christians first at Antioch.

There was something obvious that these people were distinguished, not because of their culture, not because of their background, but they were now distinguished because of their allegiance to Jesus.

[20 : 07] Jesus, the one who was crucified. Jesus, the one who was buried. Jesus, the one who was raised from the dead and ascended to heaven. Jesus is the key to these people. They're not called Barnabites. They're not called followers of Saul, but they're called Christians because the only reason why these people are different is because of what Jesus has done for them.

So we have the power that God has. We have the people that God uses. And then finally we have the paradigm or the pattern of God's church. So they're called Christians. So Jesus is at the center of what's being done here.

We're told in verse 21 that they believed and turned to the Lord. Now, if you're not a Christian here this morning, well, first of all, I'm glad you're here, whether you've been invited, whether you've just come along, whether you're a regular part of the congregation.

But you might think, well, this is a service that's predominantly about Tom. It's predominantly about Christians. It's predominantly for those who are believers. But notice that the message of the Gospel is so often clearly presented. Very clear. A great number of people believed and turned to the Lord.

They heard about Jesus, maybe in an unusual setting, maybe from unusual people, maybe the circumstances were not expected, but they heard, they believed, and they turned.

[21 : 33] So that's the pattern of what a Christian is. It's not just knowing about Jesus, but there's a faith, a trust, a personal reliance upon Jesus.

And notice that it's not just a one-off event that they hear, they believe, they turn, and nothing else happens. The ministry of Barnabas, the encourager, was that he encouraged them to remain true to the Lord with all their hearts.

You see, when you meet Jesus, it becomes a lifelong relationship. When you come to know him, you want to know him better. When you meet him, you want to know more about him, and you want to become more like him. So it's a lifelong relationship that begins with conversion, but doesn't end with conversion.

These people who were scattered came to Antioch. Some spoke to Jews, some spoke to Greeks, some of the audience responded, and Barnabas comes and encourages them to remain true to the Lord with all their hearts.

And you might say that here is Barnabas, a great preacher, a great encourager for God's people. But notice that Barnabas was used to bring people to the Lord.

[22 : 47] So it's not just that Barnabas is for the Lord's people, and maybe Saul is the evangelist, but each has these gifts of encouragement, teaching, and witnessing to the gospel.

So even in the midst of blessing, more and more people are coming to hear and coming to know and coming to trust.

What else do we see as a pattern for the church? Well, what we see here is that faith expresses itself in action. It expresses itself in commitment. It expresses itself in being true to God, but it also expresses itself in generosity.

At the very end of the passage, we're told that there was a severe famine spread over the entire Roman world, and the disciples, each according to his ability, decided to provide help for the brothers living in Judea.

Now this is remarkable. It's not surprising when people help people they know. If somebody that you love and care for is in trouble, well, your natural response is to help them.

[23 : 55] But this church in Antioch, a church with different backgrounds, unusual beginning, they are now moved to help a group of people who they may never have met, may never meet, have no knowledge of firsthand, but they hear that believers are in trouble. They're far away in a place called Judea, and they want to help them and they help them practically.

Now that shows that the gospel changes us. It changes the way we think about God. It changes the way we think about Jesus. It changes the way we think about money. It changes the way we think about our time, our possessions, etc.

So here you have a pattern or a paradigm for the church. All different kinds of people, all different kinds of backgrounds coming to know Jesus, turning to him in faith, committing their hearts to him, and now sharing in service to the saints.

In the ancient world, each people generally had their own God. Each nation had its own God or God's, so that wasn't surprising. But what is remarkable here is that people are coming to know and believe in the one true God, in the one true Savior Jesus, and they're coming from all different backgrounds, but they're coming to the same point.

So this morning we are gathered in the same building physically, but many of us are from different places. Different places within the city of Edinburgh, different places within the country of Scotland, different countries in the world.

[25 : 30] And here we are, and we're adding our amends to the same prayers. We're singing the same words. We're reading the same passage. We're hearing the same sermon. And the question that I have for you, are you finding yourself identifying with this church, in this city, with these people?

Are you finding that your heart is committed likewise to Jesus? Are you finding that your life is being obviously affected by the grace of Jesus? Do you find that you are committed to him, no matter who you are or what your background might be?

Because this church in Antioch was a dynamic church. It was a diverse church. It was an obvious church that enjoyed the obvious blessing of God. And I would suggest that's true of this church. The church in Antioch grew, you might say, from strength to strength.

And our hope in our prayer today is that you as a congregation, that Tom as an assistant minister, that this might be a new chapter of blessing, a new chapter of encouragement, that we might look to passages like this and see what God has done, and to remind ourselves that God continues to do the same thing, and that our prayer would be that the hand of the Lord would be with us, would be with you, would be with Derek, would be with Tom, would be with the elders, would be with the deacons, and would be with every one of God's people, that we would share the gospel with whoever we come in contact with.

People that are like us, people that are different from us, and that the blessing of God would be so obvious that a visitor would come in and would say, I can only conclude that the grace of God is at work in this place. So may God bless His Word, may God bless His work, and may God bless His workers.

[27 : 26] And if you're a Christian, you are one of those workers. Amen. Let us pray. Father, thank you for your word to us. Thank you for the pattern that you give us.

Above all, we thank you that you have a powerful and a mighty hand. So we commit ourselves to you. We pray that throughout the remainder of this service that everything done and said would be pleasing in your sight, and that you might be pleased to grow this congregation, that it might continue to move from strength to strength, and that more people would hear, that more people would believe, that more people would turn, that more people would devote their whole hearts to the Lord Jesus. And these things we pray in His name. Amen.