

SERMONS FROM ANTIOCH

by Jackson Morro

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INTRODUCTION

Hello and God bless you,

This current book, *Sermons From Antioch*, was born as a result of an in-depth chapter by chapter, verse by verse study of the Book of the Acts of the Apostles at Christ's Chapel's Thursday night Bible study. For over a year, we devoted our Thursday nights to a complete study of Acts.

In the course of this study we would, from time to time, come across a certain church—the Church of Antioch. This assembly of believers is only mentioned a few times, but if we pause and pray about the scriptures that speak of Antioch, we find the Holy Spirit revealing to us the existence of a powerful, Spirit-filled, Spirit-led assembly of believers.

Antioch was basically a Gentile city north of Israel in the area of Syria. After the persecution that resulted in the disciple Stephen's death (Acts 7), Christians began scattering from Jerusalem to other parts of the Roman Empire. In Acts 11, we see that a group of Christians went to Antioch, began preaching the message of the Risen Lord Jesus Christ, and that the Holy Spirit moved in a great way, and a powerful church or assembly was established. The Apostles sent Barnabas to visit this group and he was encouraged by what God had done. He went to Tarsus, got Paul, who was developing as a great teacher of the Word. For a whole year, Barnabas and Paul taught the Word at Antioch and the people became solidly established in the Lord.

The disciples were first called Christians, or “the anointed ones” at Antioch (Acts 11:26). They were a group that moved in the power of the Holy Spirit, the power of the same anointing that “the Christ” moved in, the power to remove burdens and destroy yokes of oppression (Isaiah 10:27).

The Church at Antioch was the springboard for the *universal* mission of the Risen Christ, that the Body of Christ would truly be a House of Prayer for *all nations* (Mark 11:17). This was established through Antioch. Antioch was multicultural (Gentiles, Greeks, as well as Jews) and multiracial (Simon the black—Acts 13; Paul the Jew; also Syrians, Africans, Jews).

The Church at Antioch was a church that first of all, ministered to the Lord. It drew its strength from its worship, prayer and time in the Word. It was a church that *sent* and *received*. At the Holy Spirit's direction, it sent out missionary teams to establish new churches and it received those same missionaries back when they needed strength and renewal after tiring from their labors in the spiritual noonday sun (Acts 18:23). Although the Church at Jerusalem was the origin and center of all the churches, the place where the Holy Spirit birthed the Church of Jesus Christ on the day of Pentecost, nevertheless, the Church at Antioch surpassed the work of the "Mother" Church at Jerusalem.

One day in my prayer time, I was expressing to the Lord how I wished so much there had been an Epistle to Antioch. I love reading the letters that Paul, James, Peter and John wrote to the different churches. They are so informative and have the direct inspiration and authority of the Holy Spirit Himself (John 14:26). Why couldn't there have been a letter to Antioch to tell us more about this wonderful assembly? As I was praying, the Holy Spirit ministered to my spirit that there was *no* letter to Antioch because Antioch had been established as the "Mother Church" to the Gentiles. At Antioch, the word "from" became more important than the word "to." They were more concerned with "giving" than "receiving." Furthermore, the Holy Spirit had made sure that all we need to know about Antioch has been put in the Word. If we prayerfully read the Word, the Holy Spirit Himself will give us all we need to know (John 16:13).

I pray that this little book will somehow come to have a special place in developing your walk with God.

Take care and God bless you.

CHAPTER ONE

MINISTRY TO THE LORD

In the Book of Acts we read:

Now there were at Antioch, in the church that was there, prophets and

teachers... And while they were ministering to the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, "Set apart for Me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them." Then, when they had fasted and prayed and laid their hands on them, they sent them away. So, being sent out by the Holy Spirit...

- Acts 13:1-4

We see here that the Church at Antioch was an assembly of believers that had, as its first and foremost goal, ministry to the Lord. The focus of Christian life at Antioch was *worship*, not *activity*. We read in the Old Testament, "Not by might nor by power, but by My Spirit says the Lord of hosts." (Zechariah 4:6) The Church at Antioch learned early on that successful work in the Kingdom of God was not a result of human ingenuity or innovative programs, but rather success was based on the anointing and sending by the Holy Spirit. Antioch learned that the basis of all successful evangelism came from giving priority to the Lord of the work rather than the work of the Lord.

The Holy Spirit had already made His point well on the Day of Pentecost in Acts, Chapter 2, when God used a very ordinary, poorly educated fisherman named Simon Peter to preach a message to a crowd at Jerusalem and 3,000 people were convicted in their hearts to receive Jesus Christ as their Savior. Five-thousand more believed a few days later when a crippled beggar at the Gate of the Temple in Jerusalem was healed when Peter spoke healing to the man by using the Name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth.

The believers at Antioch were well aware that it only took one word from Heaven, one word from the Great High Priest in the Eternal Throne Room to set things in motion and accomplish more in one afternoon than human effort could accomplish in one whole lifetime. The early church knew it was more important to listen to hear what God actually wanted done than to try in themselves to do what they thought God would like done.

But even more than being result-oriented or outcome-oriented, the early church simply loved their Lord and loved spending time with Him in His presence. The early Church was in the springtime of Christianity when believers had a heard toward Jesus that we have rarely if ever seen again in Church history. They didn't think it was a waste of time to put activity "on hold" just to spend time in the presence of the Lord in praise and worship. I was once in a discussion group and one of the members, Basil Pennington, a Trappist monk who has written many books on prayer, stated that fellowship is simply "wasting time with someone you love, because

they are worth your time and attention—and it ends up as not a waste, but a sacred gift.”

So, Antioch would pray, and praise, and worship, and fast and listen for the voice of the Holy Spirit. They would communicate with their Lord Jesus from spirit to Spirit and from heart to Heart. They would praise the Lord and build an invisible throne for Him to come and sit upon in their midst (Psalm 22:3). His presence would manifest His glory—a literal cloud of glory would be in their midst, feeding, strengthening and enlivening their spirits, their inner man.

It was in this atmosphere that not only could the Holy Spirit speak, but He would be *heard* and He would be *obeyed*. Yielded hearts are necessary if they are to be hearing hearts and obeying hearts. It is the yielded, hearing and obeying heart that will produce fruit in the Kingdom of God, fruit that remains (John 15:22). The message of the Church of Antioch for our time is that we as believers must first value above all else quality time given to Jesus to develop intimacy with Him. That priority is so necessary that our success or failure as disciples will be determined by the value we place on ministry to the Lord. In His presence, He will reveal His own loving, servant heart to us and in His presence we will be so touched by that revelation that our one consuming desire will be to become like Him and to become one with Him. At that moment, all our own personal agendas and ego-driven motivations will fall away as we simply look at Him face to face with the eyes of our spirit. It is at that moment of loving surrender that He can speak to us and use us. It is at that moment we can listen and obey.

This ministry to the Lord Jesus is such a precious commodity to Him. It is a reflection of His own devotion to the Heavenly Father in His role as the Son of Man (John 10:14-18). He searches and searches through the Body of Christ today for the hearts that will minister to Him. He rarely finds it, but He found it at Antioch.

I remember once at a Christ's Chapel Bible study, someone prayed in tongues and I felt led to bring the interpretation (see 1 Corinthians, Chapters 12 and 14 for the biblical basis of those gifts). The interpretation was basically the Word of the Lord Jesus telling us that for every time we've been disappointed by someone who has hurt us or let us down, we should consider all the times that He has been disappointed because we have not fellowshiped with Him or we have considered other things a higher priority when He has called us to fellowship with Him. He loves us nevertheless with a perfect love, but we should always remember that in addition to loving us with Divine Love as the Son of God, He also loves us with the perfect human heart as the Son of Man, and that perfect human heart desires

our fellowship. This was a major revelation to me, because all of a sudden it hit me, as it should hit you, that JESUS DESIRES OUR FELLOWSHIP, EVEN CRAVES IT, BECAUSE NOT ONLY IS HE THE SON OF GOD, BUT HE IS ALSO THE SON OF MAN WHO LOVES US WITH THE PERFECT HUMAN HEART.

I remember once, while praying and meditating about the subject of ministry to the Lord, the Holy Spirit impressed a certain vision on my heart. In this vision it was a bright sunny day in Heaven with a clear blue sky and lots of perfect green grass. I was quite concerned about a list of prayer needs I had and, worried and anxious, I was hurrying in to see Jesus. As I met Jesus, I started unloading things from my list to Him. “Lord, I really need this one right away. I need that one pretty soon. I’d really like this third one as soon as You can...”

But Jesus just looked at me and smiled and said, “Let’s sit down and fellowship together. Let’s have a lemonade together.” Suddenly, I noticed a white lawn table and two chairs. So I sat down and an angel brought Jesus and myself two large cool lemonades. We just started talking and sharing fellowship—not problems—together. Suddenly, Jesus looked at a group of angels and snapped His fingers and said, “You angels over there, take care of the first half of the things on this list.” The angels quickly were off like streaks of light bringing answers to those needs.

Then Jesus said to me, “This lemonade was good. Why don’t we have another?” And an angel brought us another lemonade. We sat and just enjoyed more fellowship together. Suddenly, Jesus looked at another group of angels and said, “You angels, look at this list and take care of the second half of this list of needs and do it right now.” And suddenly, in this time of fellowship, all my needs had been met.

I once heard a pastor that I tremendously respect say, “We Christians always want to have God move His hand on our behalf. If we’d only learn to seek His face, we’d find His hand right there when we find His face.”

One man in particular in the Bible knew how precious ministry to the Lord is. This man was King David in the Old Testament. He was chosen by God, anointed to be the king and leader over the nation of Israel. He wielded political authority and power; he enjoyed riches and fame. And yet in his heart, he knew only one thing really mattered: heart to heart intimacy with his Lord. He knew the value of looking at his Lord face to face with the eyes of his spirit: “In Thy presence there is fullness of joy; in Thy right hand there are pleasures forever.” (Psalm 16:11) (Jesus is the right hand of God the Father.)

David would even have been willing to trade all his wealth, fame and

glory to be in the Lord's presence if that's what it took: "For a day in Thy courts is better than a thousand outside. I would rather stand at the threshold of the house of my God, than dwell in the tents of wickedness." (Psalm 84:10) We would all do well to read the Book of Psalms and let the spirit of ministry to the Lord in those words soak our own hearts. Indeed, the assembly at Antioch did just that, to the delight and pleasure of their Master.

CHAPTER TWO

GOD'S "NO" MEANS A BETTER "YES"

The second outstanding event that God uses at Antioch to speak to us today is: When God says "No," it means He has a better "Yes" for us down the line. Sometimes we go to God with a very demanding attitude in prayer. And while God wants us to be bold in faith, especially in claiming the promises that our Lord Jesus bought and paid for us, He wants us to keep our hearts pure and obedient to Him. Many times, prayers go unanswered because we have a wrong motive when we ask. "You do not have because you do not ask. You ask and do not receive because you ask with wrong motives, so that you may spend it on your pleasures." (James 4:2-3)

While we have to be strong in faith when claiming God's promises, we always also have to be careful of the intention of our hearts when we ask. "Every man's way is right in his own eyes, but the Lord weighs the hearts." (Proverbs 21:2) So we go to God, realizing that our Lord Jesus is the One Who opens and shuts the right doors in our lives (Revelation 3:7). We also trust that a good God will withhold no good thing from us (Psalm 84:11). So, if God closes, or refuses to open a certain door in our lives, we trust that He has done so in His all-knowing goodness for our benefit, not for our harm or frustration. We trust also that His present "No" means He has a better "Yes" down the road of our obedient walk.

We see in Acts, Chapters 15 and 16, that as Paul and Silas were embarking from Antioch on their second missionary journey, they received two "No" answers from God regarding their wish to bring the Gospel to certain areas. First, the Holy Spirit forbade them to preach in Asia (verse 6). Then the Spirit of Jesus did not permit them to go to Bithynia (verse 7). Outwardly, both requests looked fine. How could there be harm in doing something good? Why would God, Who wants all people saved (1 Timothy 2:3-4), say "No"?

As we see Paul and Silas walk through the walk of obedience, the answer becomes obvious. God had a better “Yes” for them.

First, God gave Paul a vision of a man from Macedonia asking for help (verses 9-10). Imagine getting such explicit direction from God! But God, Who is no respecter of persons, will give you that same type of certain, unmistakable direction if you are truly willing to do His will.

Second, God brought three great things to pass at Philippi in Macedonia.

Paul and Silas met a rich businesswoman, Lydia. She was the equivalent of our modern day fashion designer. She was a successful person. She was also a worshipper of God but had not had the true Way presented to her, the way of salvation through faith in Jesus Christ. When Paul preached the Gospel to Lydia, she believed and was baptized and opened her house in hospitality to Paul and Silas. God was able at this time to work His works. A house church was established at Lydia’s residence in Philippi (Acts 16:40). God was able to show that He wanted to use women in prominent positions in the Body of Christ as well as men (Galatians 3:27-29). Further, we read in the Book of Revelation in our Lord’s message to the seven churches that one of those churches was at Thyatira (Revelation 2:18). We know that Lydia was from Thyatira. In all likelihood, being the dynamic person she was, she may have established a church on one of her trips back to her home town.

We also see that as Paul and Silas continued to preach at Philippi, a young girl began following them around. For many days, she would interrupt Paul’s preaching by shouting out “These men are servants of the Most High God who are proclaiming to you the way of salvation.” (Acts 16:17) Outwardly, the words sounded good, but they were spoken at times that interrupted the word being preached and distracted Paul and the listeners receiving the message. The girl’s words hindered the full effects of the anointing of the Holy Spirit and the benefits of Paul’s message. After several days, Paul discerned through the Gifts of the Holy Spirit that the young girl was actually possessed and controlled by a demonic spirit, a spirit of divination or fortune-telling. In fact, she was a slave girl who belonged to masters who were using her to make a great profit telling peoples’ fortunes. Paul cast the spirit out of her in the name of Jesus Christ. She lost her ability to tell fortunes and she no longer interrupted Paul’s preaching, but she was set free! A precious soul was won for the Kingdom of God, and the devil’s domain had been plundered once again!

When the girl’s masters saw that they had lost their hope of profit, they didn’t rejoice that the girl got saved—they got angry at Paul and Silas, brought them to court and accused them of civil disorder. Paul and Silas were summarily whipped and thrown into prison in stocks and chains.

However, instead of feeling sorry for themselves and indulging in a pity party, Paul and Silas at midnight on a day when things had gone wrong, when they were in pain, nevertheless decided to praise God. They sang hymns of praise to God and all the other prisoners were listening. At this point, God had the opportunity to show for all time the power of praise.

A spirit of praise will break the back of any problem we face. When a spirit of praise becomes established in our heart, any problem we face immediately becomes a “dead duck” and God’s victorious outcome is guaranteed at that moment. We see that an earthquake shook the prison and all the doors were opened and all the chains were loosed. Such is the liberating power of praise. The jailer was so impressed that he asked Paul, “What must I do to be saved?” (Acts 16:30) The jailer got saved, took Paul and Silas to his house and washed their wounds. Many of the jailer’s family and friends accepted Jesus Christ as Savior and a house church was established that became the church at Philippi.

All these great things happened because Paul and Silas were willing to accept God’s “No” to mean that He had a better “Yes” down the road. And by the way, God had all bases covered. Do you remember Asia and Bithynia? Well, God sent Peter to preach to them. God didn’t forget them. We read in 1 Peter 1:1, “Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ, To those who reside as aliens, scattered throughout Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, *Asia*, and *Bithynia*...” (Emphasis added.)

I am convinced that there are many Christians who have missed God’s best for them because they didn’t trust God that when He said “No,” He had a better “Yes” for them down the road. As Christians, we have important times in our lives when we have to stop attempting to kick a certain door open but let the One Who opens and no man can shut (Revelation 3:7) open the right door for us. There is only frustration and aggravation behind a door we kick open. There is favor and God’s abundance behind the doors He opens for us.

CHAPTER THREE

RECEIVING BACK AND RENEWING

The third important thing we see about the Church at Antioch is that it was a place that received back those it sent out to renew and restore them after they had labored in the heat of the day for the Lord. The Church of

Antioch became a place of spiritual “R & R” (rest and relaxation) for its missionaries. Like the Song of Solomon, the missionaries could return to Antioch and say, “I am black but lovely... do not stare at me because I am swarthy, for the sun has burned me...They made me caretaker of the vineyards, but I have not taken care of my own vineyard. Tell me, O you whom my soul loves, where do you pasture your flock, where do you make it lie down at noon?” (Song of Solomon 1:5,6.7) Antioch was a place for the tired worker to find a season of pasture, where their sunburned skin would be seen as beauty, not ugliness.

The world system has a saying, “You can’t go home again.” But for the Christian, just the opposite is true. The Christian walk is a constant walk of “going home again,” of going back to your roots, back to your Source, God. The Parable of the Prodigal Son in Luke 15:11-32 reveals the folly of a spiritually self-sufficient life. Our Lord Jesus Himself stated, “Abide in Me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, unless it abides in the vine, so neither can you unless you abide in Me. I am the Vine, you are the branches; he who abides in Me, and I in him, he bears much fruit; for apart from Me you can do nothing.” (John 15:4-5) The wise, mature Christian is the one who has discovered that his strength is not from himself, but he is strongest when he is most dependent upon his Source, the Greater One within him (1 John 4:4).

In Acts 18, we see the great Apostle Paul at a time in his ministry when he was tired and, for all practical purposes, “burned out.” Yes, even that mighty soldier, who used the whole armor of God so well, needed rest and renewal from time to time. Paul was at the end of his second missionary journey in the city of Corinth. For many years he has traveled, witnessed to both Jew and Gentile, established new churches, seen the mighty works of God worked in his midst, and had suffered and received much persecution and abuse at the hands of those who rejected the Gospel. Now, he was at the bustling city of Corinth outwardly doing the work of God, but inwardly tired and hurting. Paul was the first to admit that in himself, he was nothing. Without salvation, he was a human devil who sought to kill Christians in the name of “true religion.” With salvation and the anointing, he was the Paul who could do all things through Christ Who strengthened him (Philippians 4:13). As a Christian who was burned out, Paul was just a tired, short (the name “Paul” means “little one” or “shorty” in our language) unimpressive Jew (1 Corinthians 2:1-5).

So, here in Acts 18, we see a great warrior of the Kingdom who is tired in spirit. We see him, even being fearful, almost “shell-shocked” at all he has gone through. The great Apostle Paul weary and tired and fearful?

Apparently so, for the Lord Jesus appeared to Paul and spoke to him at Corinth saying, “Do not be afraid any longer, but go on speaking and do not be silent; for I am with you, and no man will attack you in order to harm you, for I have many people in this city.” Acts 18:9-10) And we see that those words strengthened Paul and he was able to go on for a year and a half teaching the Word of God at Corinth.

Nevertheless, the unbelieving Jews, the religious people of his day, stirred up a persecution against him and brought him before the civil authorities, the Roman proconsul Gallio. Gallio didn’t want to bother with the apparent “religious and ethnic” dispute. He was concerned with real civil and criminal matters of peace and public safety. So he threw them out of court. But the Jews took one Jewish Christian convert named Sosthenes and beat him up while Gallio, who couldn’t care less, looked the other way. In this mayhem, however, notice there was one person who didn’t get assaulted—and that was Paul because our Lord Jesus was faithful to His promise in Acts 18:10.

But Paul knew, nevertheless, he had come to a time when he needed inner renewal. He started traveling to Antioch. He knew he had to get back “home” for a while. He knew he needed fellowship with the brethren again. He knew he needed some time of undisturbed ministry to the Lord again. He knew he had to rest under the “glory cloud” again for a season. So, he headed back. On the way, he still did the Lord’s work. He stopped at Ephesus, spoke in the synagogue and was well-received. The Ephesians wanted him to stay and help them establish a Christian assembly. But Paul didn’t consent. He said, “I’ll be back to help if God wills it, but right now I’ve got to get back to Antioch.” (Acts 18:20-21). Paul knew it was time to go “home” for a season. And he did (Acts 18:22-23).

That, however, is not the end of the story. The Word of God doesn’t say too much about what Paul did at Antioch in verses 22-23, but it’s a good assumption that he ministered to the Lord and abided in the Vine to recharge his spiritual batteries. We read that after this time, he began his third missionary journey. He went back to Ephesus and helped establish that great church sometimes called the “Queen and Crown Jewel of the early Churches.” He fought the good fight and became a powerful witness both at Jerusalem and at Rome. And he successfully finished his course.

As Christians, we’ve got to learn that we can only give out to others what we have received. Our successful ministry to our families, loved ones, neighbors and coworkers, can only be based on what can flow out of our spirit to them. The outflow of our spirit to others always has to be preceded by the infilling of our spirit. This is why it is so, so important for all of us to regularly attend Spirit-filled worship and fellowship with others under the

“glory cloud” of God’s presence. A Christian should never be ashamed to admit he needs spiritual “R & R,” but instead should be sure that such activity is a planned part of their walk with God. Even though as a pastor, I am occupied with the concerns of the flock that God has entrusted to me, I love to go to other churches and worship and hear the Word with others just “hidden in the flock.” Truly, our hearts should agree with King David, “I was glad when they said unto me, ‘Let us go to the house of the Lord.’” (Psalm 122:1)

Remember, as a Christian you can go home again; in fact, your walk with God is a continual journey of “going back home.” God bless you today.

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We invite you to send any prayer requests you might have for prayer at our chapel prayer meetings. Send to:

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Also write to be put on our mailing list to receive periodic letters. Let us know specifically if you’d like to receive the Daily Devotional.