

RUSSELL SANDERS

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THE APOSTLE PAUL – LESSON 6

ANTIOCH

When Alexander the Great died in 332 B.C., his empire was divided between his four top generals. Antiochus received the large area of Syria (which includes modern Turkey), establishing the Seleucid dynasty. His grandson Seleucus Nicanor founded sixteen cities named Antioch in his honor. Antioch of Syria was by far the greatest of them. The Romans conquered and took it in 65 B.C.

At the time of the early church, it was the third largest city in the Roman Empire behind Rome and Alexandria, Egypt, and had a population of about 500,000. It was a major trade center and was richly adorned. It was called “the Beautiful and the Golden.” It was about 300 miles from Jerusalem.

When Herod the Great, Rome’s appointed governor over Judea began heavy persecution of both Jesus’ believers and the Jews, many fled the area to other countries. This was called the “diaspora” which forced the new church to spread beyond Israel. We see in Acts 11:19 that Antioch is one of the places to where many Followers of the Way took refuge. Antioch of Syria was a progressive cosmopolitan city willing to accommodate people of various religions, cultures, and ethnic backgrounds.

One of the seven early church deacons appointed by the apostles was a gentile proselyte to Judaism named Nicolas from Antioch, so the church had a natural connection to this very large and wealthy city. However, Antioch was very pagan oriented, and people generally lived a very immoral lifestyle.

When the scattered believers settled there, various men (Acts 11:20) came and preached the gospel to the Jews who lived there. Great numbers believed on Jesus throughout the city. It was such a strong movement that outsiders began to call these Followers of the Way “Christians” meaning “they who identify with Christ.” Antioch is where this “name” originated.

When news of this “evangelism explosion” reached Jerusalem, the apostles sent the highly regarded Barnabas to preach and teach and to set them in order. After a short time, he determined that he needed a helper. Barnabas set out to Tarsus, seeking out the zealous Saul to come to Antioch with him.

Barnabas and Saul labored together in Antioch for a whole year. This was ten years after Saul’s conversion; three years in Arabia and Damascus, and seven years laboring at home in Tarsus. This was the beginning of a significant period of Barnabas’ leading and mentoring Saul.

Antioch was to become the gentile center of the new Christian Church and the home base for the future missionary journeys of the Apostle Paul.