

## Barnabas Encourages Christians in Antioch

Luke writes in Acts 11:19-20 (RSV), **19. Now those who were scattered because of the persecution that arose over Stephen traveled as far as Phoenicia and Cyprus and Antioch, speaking the word to none except Jews. 20. But there were some of them, men of Cyprus and Cyrene, who on coming to Antioch spoke to the Greeks also, preaching the Lord Jesus.**

You would have thought that such horrendous persecution of the new church would have chilled the effect it was able to have in the first century world. Beginning at Jerusalem, threats, beatings and arrests had finally given way to murder as Stephen was stoned to death for his faith in Jesus Christ. It was decided in high places to stamp out the church then and there, but it was also decided in the Highest of High Places not to allow that to happen.

Believers, driven from their homes in Jerusalem, were scattered here and there throughout Palestine. They had lost their homes and property, but they did not lose their faith. They went as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus and Antioch. What did these people do? They spoke the word of the Lord. At first, they only shared the Gospel with their own countrymen, the Jews. Jesus was a Jew, born of the tribe of Judah. All of His apostles, the first converts, as well as the first persecutors, were Jews as well. Soon this was to change as Greeks heard and obeyed the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Although it had always been a part of God's plan to include the Gentiles into His Kingdom, it was not until the church had spread to Antioch that there was a change of course that would affect the entire world. It was at Antioch that some of the Jewish believers in Christ from Cyprus and Cyrene began for the first time to share intentionally the Good News of Jesus with pagan Gentiles. These disciples began to preach the word not only to other Jews, but also to Greeks as well.

Of course, Jesus had said it would be this way. He had commissioned His apostles to **"Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit . . ."** (Matthew 28:19). He had talked of having **"other sheep not of this fold,"** speaking of the Greeks as opposed to the **"lost sheep of Israel"** with whom He chiefly dealt during His personal ministry on Earth (John 10:16). As was the case with the Apostle Peter and the household of Cornelius, it was always in God's will and plans for the Gospel message of saving grace to be brought to the entire lost and dying world, including both the Jews and the Gentiles. For as Jesus said in Luke 19:10, **"For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost."**

Notice the contrast between the evangelism strategies of verse 19 and verse 20. Most of the Christians scattered because the persecution limited their evangelistic efforts to Jews (Acts 11:19). Another group practiced cross-cultural

evangelism, specifically targeting people without a prior background in Judaism. These believers radically crossed the major ethnic divide in the first century. The leaders of the church in Jerusalem wisely sent Joseph Barnabas to deal with this sensitive issue, as can be seen in verses 21 and 22 of Acts 11.

**21. And the hand of the Lord was with them, and a great number that believed turned to the Lord. 22. News of this came to the ears of the church in Jerusalem, and they sent Barnabas to Antioch.**

News came to the church leaders in Jerusalem from Antioch, which was the third largest city in the Roman Empire. The news was fantastic: A great number of people there were coming to Christ. Help was needed, and the apostles knew just who to send, and that was Barnabas. Antioch was an exciting church and the city was like several metropolitan areas in our state. Antioch was urban, a cultural center, cosmopolitan, and had an international population. We should encourage others by praying for the cities of Illinois and America.

When men and women teach others the Gospel, there is another partner in the effort. The **"hand of the Lord"** is in the proclamation of the Gospel to the lost. Later, Paul would refer to teachers of the Gospel as **"God's fellow workers"** in 1 Corinthians 3:9. To teach the Gospel is every Christian's duty and privilege.

It is implied that not everyone who believed turned to the Lord, though a **"great number"** of them did. This means that there must be a difference between "believing" and "turning" to the Lord. Jesus talked of believers who did not confess Him even though they believed in Him because they desired the approval of men instead in John 12:42-43. Believers who turn to the Lord are those that obey His Gospel. These would be those who are baptized into Christ for the remission of their sins (Acts 2:38, 8:12). This accomplishes, by the power of the grace of God and the blood of Christ, one's sins being washed away (Acts 22:16).

Luke continues his narrative by stating in Acts 11:23-24, **23. When he came and saw the grace of God, he was glad; and he exhorted them all to remain faithful to the Lord with steadfast purpose; 24. for he was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and of faith. And a large company was added to the Lord.**

Exhorting is another word for encouraging, so we see once again how appropriate a nickname Barnabas was for this Levite named Joseph. In verses 23-24 we can see how Barnabas encouraged the entire Body of Christ, particularly the new believers. Barnabas encouraged others by his personal example. The Bible highlights the personal qualities that opened the heart of Barnabas to influence positively the lives of others. That is what new Christians and new ministries need most of all. That is what new married couples need. That is what new parents need. They need someone to put courage into them. They need someone like Barnabas, someone who can see through the problems

of life and spot the grace of God. We all need someone who can help us believe the Lord is at work in our situation. Barnabas was a good man. More importantly, he was a man filled with the Holy Spirit and with faith.

I have often wondered why the church did not select Barnabas as a deacon. Acts 4 describes his ministry to hurting individuals. He appears to meet the spiritual qualifications required of a deacon. Every Christian can learn a vital and valuable lesson from Barnabas. You do not have to be selected by the church to fill a specific office in order to serve faithfully and greatly.

Barnabas encouraged others by his words. He exhorted individual members of the Body to ***“remain faithful with steadfast purpose.”*** In other words, Barnabas encouraged the disciples to remain true through a firm resolve of their will. New believers and old believers need teaching about the importance of perseverance and commitment to the Lord, for we all know how difficult life can be at times. But if we remain faithful unto death, a crown of life awaits us (Revelation 2:10). As the Apostle Paul would later write in 2 Timothy 4:8 (RSV), ***“Henceforth there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the Righteous Judge, will award to me on that Day, and not only to me but also to all who have loved His appearing.”***

We must encourage one another to remember our destiny if we remain true to the Lord. Salvation is too precious a gift to treat it lightly. As the writer of the *Book of Hebrews* puts it, ***23. Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for He Who promised is faithful; 24. and let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, 25. not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near.*** (Hebrews 10:23-25 [RSV]).

Continuing in Acts 11 verses 25 and 26, Luke writes, ***25. So Barnabas went to Tarsus to look for Saul; 26. and when he had found him, he brought him to Antioch. For a whole year they met with the church, and taught a large company of people; and in Antioch the disciples were for the first time called Christians.***

After encouraging the church at Antioch, Barnabas quickly searched out Paul and brought him to this amazing congregation. Barnabas needed help. So he went to Tarsus to look up an old friend – a man named Saul (or Paul, as he came to be known). As you know, this Paul had been a fearful persecutor of the church in his younger days, but the Lord Jesus “ambushed” him on the road to Damascus and changed him from the inside out. The problem was, once Paul became a Christian, no one in the church was willing to trust him. No one wanted to get near him for fear it was a trap. No one, that is, except Barnabas. Here we see Barnabas as he encouraged a new convert and worker in God’s harvest, Saul. When the early church expressed reluctance to accept the former persecutor Paul into the fellowship, Barnabas became to Paul a comforter and helper as he sought out Paul and came alongside him to help

assimilate him into the fellowship of Christian believers. Luke records this encouragement from Barnabas thusly in Acts 9:26-27 (RSV): **26. And when he had come to Jerusalem he attempted to join the disciples; and they were all afraid of him, for they did not believe that he was a disciple. 27. But Barnabas took him, and brought him to the apostles, and declared to them how on the road he had seen the Lord, Who spoke to him, and how at Damascus he had preached boldly in the name of Jesus.** Is there an individual in our congregation that people do not accept for whatever reason? If there is, can you be the one that helps this person be accepted into the life of the church?

By the time we get to Acts 11, Paul had been living in anonymity for years, rejected by his fellow Jews for his faith in Christ, and kept at arm's length by the Christian community because of his reputation for being a loose cannon. It was Paul's own time of refining, his own time "in the wilderness."

Barnabas knew Paul was a little compulsive, and a little rough around the edges. But Barnabas believed Paul had gifts for ministry. So he found Paul and invited him to join the leadership team of the new church in Antioch. Can you imagine what that meant for Paul? For years he had been put up on the shelf, doing nothing, seemingly friendless and forgotten. And then one day Barnabas showed up and said, "Paul, we need you. *I* need you!" Talk about putting courage into a person! Think what might have happened if Barnabas had not reached out to Paul. The church of Jesus Christ might have lost its greatest missionary and theologian. But Barnabas was there. The Son of Encouragement believed in this guy, and trusted him with a leadership position in the fastest growing church in the world.

It was during this year in which Barnabas and Saul were at Antioch that the disciples were first called "Christians." The disciples were followers of Christ. A disciple of Jesus is happy to wear the name that identifies one as being a follower of the Lord. Peter tells us in 1 Peter 4:16 (RSV), ". . . **yet if one suffers as a Christian, let him not be ashamed, but under that name let him glorify God.**" When we suffer and are persecuted for our faith and belief in Jesus, we give glory to God. It is of such people that Jesus said in Matthew 5:10-12 (RSV), **10. "Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven. 11. Blessed are you when men revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on My account. 12. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in Heaven, for so men persecuted the prophets who were before you."**

Though the enemies of Christ may speak the name with a sneer, disciples wear it joyfully. The Lord has been sanctified in our hearts (1 Peter 3:15).

Luke continues in Acts 11:27-30 by writing, **27. Now in these days prophets came down from Jerusalem to Antioch. 28. And one of them named**

***Agabus stood up and foretold by the Spirit that there would be a great famine over all the world; and this took place in the days of Claudius. 29. And the disciples determined, everyone according to his ability, to send relief to the brethren who lived in Judea; 30. and they did so, sending it to the elders by the hand of Barnabas and Saul.***

Barnabas encouraged others by participating in a disaster relief ministry during a time of horrendous famine. He encouraged others by his personal presence and aid in a time of great disaster.

As we read on in the *Book of Acts*, we see Barnabas taking Paul with him on that first great missionary journey. Barnabas was clearly the leader and Paul was the protégé. But something interesting happened as the story continued. Barnabas stepped back and allowed Paul to assume the leadership position. You can see this in your Bible. In the first part of Acts 13 their names are always listed as ***“Barnabas and Saul/Paul.”*** But just a little later on in Acts 13 and further on into Acts 15, it becomes ***“Paul and Barnabas.”*** Barnabas is in the background and Paul becomes the recognized leader.

One of the acid tests of an encourager is the ability to let someone else take the lead and get the credit. To recognize potential in a colleague and encourage him or her to move ahead without becoming jealous or resentful – that is a Barnabas. But this chapter in the story of Paul and Barnabas ends on a somewhat sad note. Our final reading is from Acts 15:36-41 (RSV):

***36. And after some days Paul said to Barnabas, “Come, let us return and visit the brethren in every city where we proclaimed the word of the Lord, and see how they are.” 37. And Barnabas wanted to take with them John called Mark. 38. But Paul thought best not to take with them one who had withdrawn from them in Pamphylia, and had not gone with them to the work. 39. And there arose a sharp contention, so that they separated from each other; Barnabas took Mark with him and sailed away to Cyprus, 40. but Paul chose Silas and departed, being commended by the brethren to the grace of the Lord. 41. And he went through Syria and Cilicia, strengthening the churches.***

On that first missionary trip one of their team, a young man named John Mark, deserted them. We do not know why. It could have been illness or homesickness or just plain fear. But he bailed out on them. Now, at the start of another missionary trip Barnabas wanted to take John Mark along with them. But Paul won't buy it. “He failed us before,” Paul figures, “we can't trust him any longer.”

It definitely was not Paul's finest hour. Paul saw only John Mark's past failure, whereas Barnabas saw his future potential. Just as he had done with Paul, Barnabas believed John Mark will become effective if someone will believe in him

and mentor him. In other words, Barnabas put courage into him. It caused the breakup of the original team, but the net result was two new teams. Paul and Silas went one way, while Barnabas and John Mark went another.

Now, imagine what would have happened if Barnabas had not been there for John Mark. In all likelihood he would have given up in shame and drifted away from the Christian community, never to be heard from again. But this did not happen to John Mark because of a man named Barnabas. And tradition has it that years later John Mark became part of the mission team led by the Apostle Peter, that he recorded Peter's preaching about Jesus, and those records formed the basis for the Gospel that bears his name – the *Gospel of Mark* (John Mark, that is).

Back in the mid 1970s a man named Ron Bartanen was preaching at the Highway Church of Christ congregation in Sullivan, and he needed help. So one day out of the blue he approached one of the youths in the congregation to see if he would be willing to go visiting some ill members of the congregation at St. Mary's Hospital in Decatur. At the time, this young man was a 14 year old freshman in high school who worked part time after school and on Saturdays washing pots and pans and sweeping the floor of the bakery on the square, a young man who had no clear idea what to do with his life, a guy whose faith was pretty shaky and who had no experience whatsoever in ministry. But Ron thought he saw something more and asked this fellow to help him with his visiting and to help the other youth of the congregation to hear and learn about Jesus Christ. At a time in his life when this young man felt friendless and without direction in his life, Ron saw something in him that others did not. Ron also encouraged this young man to start leading singing and giving devotionals. If you have not already guessed it by now, I was that young man. And I can tell you without a doubt, I would not be here today doing what I am doing if it had not been for a Barnabas by the name of Ron Bartanen who put courage into me and invited me into the ministry.

By the way, there is one more reference to John Mark in the New Testament. It is at the end of 2 Timothy (the letter Paul wrote just before he was executed in Rome). In chapter 4 verse 11 (RSV) Paul tells Timothy, ***“Get Mark and bring him with you; for he is very useful in serving me.”*** Eventually, even Paul came around to see the value in this young man named John Mark, and it all was because of Barnabas and his encouraging character.

Our New Testament has 27 books and letters. The name of Barnabas is not attached to any of them. But if Barnabas had not put courage into a forgotten man named Paul, we probably would not have the 13 letters that bear his name. And if Barnabas had not put courage into a failure named John Mark, it is unlikely we would have his Gospel – or, for that matter, the Gospels of Matthew and Luke that are based on the outline set forth in Mark. Never underestimate the power of an encourager! We need more Barnabases, more sons and daughters of

encouragement, in the church of Jesus Christ today. There are so many things that discourage us, that leave us alone and afraid. We need those unsung heroes like Barnabas who put courage into us – by giving generously, by seeing and affirming the grace of God at work in the lives of others, by raising up new leaders and giving them the chance to succeed, by believing in folks who have made a mistake and helping them believe in themselves.

How about you? Can you think of a person or a family in need of financial encouragement? A young couple who cannot quite make ends meet? A family whose breadwinner is out of work and the bills are stacking up? A person hit with medical expenses that insurance will not cover? A single parent whose bank account and self-esteem are both at rock bottom? Those are all real situations. And you could be the one who makes a crucial difference. Might the Lord be nudging you to provide some encouragement this week?

Do you know someone who is discouraged, alone, struggling with a heavy load of grief or anxiety? What if you became that person's Barnabas, and made it your goal to put courage into that person? How? Well, you could begin by praying for that person every day. You could write a letter of affirmation and support. You could get together and spend some time just listening, letting the person feel your support, and then taking all you have heard back to God in prayer. If there is sickness or grief, you could look for ways to cover some of the practical needs – meals, shopping, cleaning, childcare. It is amazing how much courage can be passed on through the gift of a good casserole!

And do not forget the ones who feel like failures. The divorced and those undergoing the pain of divorce. The anxious parents whose teenage kids are rebelling. The folks swallowed up by depression. The people dealing with job loss. The alcoholic and his or her family. The person whose spouse is having an affair. And on, and on, and on. If you know of someone who feels like a failure, are you big enough to extend a hand of encouragement? Will you get in touch with that person as soon as you can? Will you let the Lord use you to help lift the crushing feelings of failure by reaching out, by coming alongside, by putting courage into that man or that woman?

*You **can** do this.* You can make a difference that will change the lives of many. You do not have to be a professional counselor or a minister, elder or deacon. Be a Barnabas!

We are never more like Jesus Christ than when we put courage into someone who needs it. So I urge you to fix in your mind the name of at least one person you know who needs a Barnabas in their life.