

Barnabas: Son of Encouragement

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One of my favorite people in the New Testament is the disciple Barnabas because of who he is. His name is Joseph, but he is called Barnabas, meaning “Son of Encouragement.” He follows the call of Jesus, is good, kind, devoted and generous. I would like to talk today about what we know about this man from the scriptures. I think this is timely. Our culture these days seems dominated by too much hatred and contempt for others. Even in the comics, at least half of the humor I see there is in the form of put-downs. Sure, it can be amusing. But at someone else’s expense. I think Barnabas exemplifies a better way. What an honor to be called, “Son of Encouragement.”

After the Resurrection, at Pentecost, a large number of new believers, including many Jews from outside Jerusalem or Judea or Galilee, joined with the apostles and disciples to form the early Church. They pooled their resources, and spent their time in the Temple and elsewhere, proclaiming the Gospel. Among these, Luke, the writer of Acts, singles out Barnabas for mention in Chapter 4.

Acts 4: ³⁶ Thus Joseph who was surnamed by the apostles Barnabas (which means, Son of encouragement), a Levite, a native of Cyprus, ³⁷ sold a field which belonged to him, and brought the money and laid it at the apostles’ feet.

Here we see two things. One is that Barnabas is generous. The other thing is that here, already, he has already picked up the name, “Son of Encouragement.”

In the story of this earliest Church, there were two kinds of members. Jews from Judea and Galilee who chose to follow Jesus are referred to as “Hebrews” in New Testament writing. Then there are Jews from other places. In those other places, Jews were a local minority amid a predominantly Greek culture. These were called “Hellenists.” Barnabas was a Jew from Cyprus. Another of these Hellenist Jewish followers of Jesus, was Stephen. Stephen was one of seven “deacons,” chosen to make sure that the distribution of alms to the Hellenist widows was fair.

Stephen preached the Gospel, the good news of salvation in Jesus Christ, and argued with the Jews of the Hellenist synagogue in Jerusalem who did not recognize Jesus. That led to him being killed by stoning. One of those participating was a Hellenist Jewish rabbi named Saul. He was from Tarsus, a Gentile city just north of Cyprus. Saul went so far as to travel to Damascus, to bring back Jewish

followers of Jesus to Jerusalem for trial. Jesus appeared to Saul, later called Paul the Apostle, on the way. Saul's life was turned around. He now became a zealous follower of Jesus, preaching the gospel wherever he went. Three years after being called to the Gospel by Jesus, Saul traveled to Jerusalem to meet with other followers of Jesus. We can read what happened in Acts 9.

Acts 9: ²⁶ And when he [Saul] 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. ²⁸ So he went in and out among them at Jerusalem, ²⁹ preaching boldly in the name of the Lord. And he spoke and disputed against the Hellenists; but they were seeking to kill him. ³⁰ And when the brethren knew it, they brought him down to Caesare'a, and sent him off to Tarsus. 31 So the church throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria had peace and was built up; and walking in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit it was multiplied.

It is no surprise that the believers in Jerusalem were afraid of Saul and had their doubts. He had been their chief persecutor! They had no doubt heard the stories from Damascus. Those stories would be difficult to believe. Barnabas is the one to reach out and vouch for Saul, and introduce him into the fellowship.

Have you ever needed someone to vouch for you? Someone to write a letter of recommendation, for example? For me, usually the person receiving the letter had never heard of me, so a kind letter of recommendation was sufficient. But think of Saul's situation. He was a known recent enemy of the community he seeks to join! The followers of Jesus in Jerusalem are not going to take the word of just anyone that this Saul has really changed. We don't know if Barnabas knew Saul before this. He likely did. They were both Hellenist Jews. Cyprus is near Tarsus. Both of them were in Jerusalem. Perhaps they had both attended the synagogue we know was there specifically for Hellenist Jews. In supporting Saul, Barnabas was taking a chance. But he did so, and welcomed into the Church one who would be critical to Christianity reaching us, the Gentiles of the world.

Saul, now part of the church there in Jerusalem, starts doing what he had been doing in Damascus. He starts preaching. That starts getting things stirred up again.

He argues with the Hellenists. Those were the Greek background Jews, who considered the followers of Jesus as blasphemers, who had stoned Stephen. They had similar plans for Saul. The brethren in the Church found out. They bundled Saul off to Tarsus, where he came from. In verse 31, we read, “So then the church had peace.” It would seem that Saul’s early exit allowed the church to continue in Jerusalem in some sort of coexistence with Judaism. At least in the short run. There in Jerusalem, the believers were all good Jews, continuing to keep all of the Jewish law, praying in the Temple, but believing on Jesus as Messiah. In other places, that had started to change. Reading Acts 11:

Acts 11: 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. 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. 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. 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.

Up until now, the followers of Jesus were either Hebrew or Hellenist Jews. But all religiously Jews. Now we find, in Antioch, the Gospel of salvation in Jesus Christ was being preached to, and accepted by, Gentiles. We read, “the hand of the Lord was with them, and a great number that believed turned to the Lord.”

Barnabas was sent to investigate. He recognized opportunity. Saul of Tarsus had not worked out well in Jerusalem. His presence and zeal was again stirring up trouble. But, in Antioch, maybe his message and enthusiasm was just what was needed. Barnabas goes out of his way to seek out and welcome Saul, soon to be called Paul, into the community of faith yet again. Later, Barnabas and Saul travel to Jerusalem to deliver an offering to help followers of Jesus in Jerusalem, where they were suffering from a famine.

Have you ever needed a second chance? Have things ever gone bad and someone came along and helped you get on your feet again? That's what Barnabas has done for Saul. Saul turns out to be a good fit for ministry in Antioch.

I can tell you this from my own family's history. My father was an architect, primarily because that was what his father wanted. At forty years old, he decided to quit that, go to law school, and become a lawyer. My mother went back to teaching school to support the family. That plan didn't account for my brother Charlie being born up while Dad was still in law school. My mother had to take a year off from teaching. But my father's Uncle Moi stepped in and generously loaned my father what was needed to sustain our family. Later he forgave that debt. Dad finished law school and eventually practiced law in his home town of Louisa, Virginia, even serving for a while as Commonwealth's Attorney. The generosity and kindness of Uncle Moi made that possible.

Continuing with Acts 12:

Acts 12: ²⁵ And Barnabas and Saul returned from Jerusalem when they had fulfilled their mission, bringing with them John whose other name was Mark.

This verse introduces another character to our story: Mark. We know of Mark primarily as the writer of the Gospel of Mark in our Bible. Mark's mother Mary lived in Jerusalem. She has hosted the believers in her home during the days after the Resurrection. That was where the disciples were gathered in prayer, in Acts 12:12, when Peter was miraculously freed from prison. So Mark and his mother were closely connected to the church in Jerusalem. It also turns out that Mark was a cousin of Barnabus. Paul mentioned that in his letter to the Colossians.

Acts 13 Now in the church at Antioch there were prophets and teachers, Barnabas, Simeon who was called Niger, Lucius of Cyre'ne, Man'a-en a member of the court of Herod the tetrarch, and Saul. ² While they were worshipping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, "Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them." ³ Then after fasting and praying they laid their hands on them and sent them off.

This is the beginning of what is now known as "Paul's first missionary journey." We don't have time for all of the details, so I'll just mention a few events. The first stop was Cyprus, where Barnabas is from. Then they left Cyprus

and sailed to Pamphylia, a district on the nearby coast of Asia Minor, modern-day Asiatic Turkey. There John Mark departed, leaving Barnabas and Paul to continue. We don't know why Mark left. Luke doesn't explain it. Barnabas and Paul continued on inland to four cities in southern Galatia before returning to Antioch.

Acts 15: But some men came down from Judea and were teaching the brethren [in Antioch], “Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved.”² And when Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and debate with them, Paul and Barnabas and some of the others were appointed to go up to Jerusalem to the apostles and the elders about this question.

Concerning this business at Antioch, we also have testimony from Paul's own hand. I'm reading from his letter to the Galatians, the churches he has, with Barnabas, just established on that first journey.

Galatians 2: ¹¹ But when Cephas [that is, Peter] came to Antioch I opposed him to his face, because he stood condemned. ¹² For before certain men came from James [head of the Jerusalem Church], he ate with the Gentiles; but when they came he drew back and separated himself, fearing the circumcision party. ¹³ And with him the rest of the Jews acted insincerely, so that even Barnabas was carried away by their insincerity. ¹⁴ But when I saw that they were not straightforward about the truth of the gospel, I said to Cephas [that is, Peter] before them all, “If you, though a Jew, live like a Gentile and not like a Jew, how can you compel the Gentiles to live like Jews?”

It's just like Paul at this time to tell it like it is, no subtlety, sensitivity cast aside. Barnabas is accused here, along with Peter, of having withdrawn from full fellowship with the Gentile Christians under the watchful eye of “certain men” from James. James was Jesus's brother, who by now was recognized as the head of the Church in Jerusalem. Maybe Barnabas and Peter were trying to be diplomatic. Jews would not eat with Gentiles, it was “unclean.” Yet, Peter and Barnabas had been doing so, as part of a united Christian fellowship there in Antioch. Up until now.

The basic question was this: Do you have to become a Jew, and be circumcised, to be a Christian? The Council of Jerusalem decided the matter. Paul and Barnabas returned to Antioch, and proclaimed the decision that Gentile believers were NOT required to become Jews. That's when Paul dashed off a letter

to the Churches in Galatia to tell them the same thing. That brings us to our last mention of Barnabas in Acts:

Acts 15: 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 Pamphyl’ia, 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.

Barnabas believes that Mark deserves another chance. Paul doesn’t. They split. Mark goes with Barnabas. Ultimately, though, we do know that Mark was reconciled to Paul, and is mentioned in some of his letters. Paul also mentions Barnabas in a few letters.

Mark, as we know, eventually was with Peter in Rome, where he wrote what we know as the Gospel according to Mark, the very first of the gospels to be written, and a foundation upon which Matthew and Luke write their lengthier gospels. I can’t help but believe that Barnabas was a critical influence on Mark’s life, and was there when he needed to be defended, trusted, and encouraged. This is the one instance we read of Barnabas being contentious. He fought to defend someone who needed that second chance, and stood by his principles. The Church, and we in our time, are blessed by Mark having been encouraged to continue in ministry and find his mission.

Paul and Barnabas are in some senses opposites. Wherever Paul went, a riot was likely to follow. Barnabas, in contrast, must have worked hard to keep the early church together and at peace. Where Barnabas was willing to forgive and try again, Paul wasn’t. Barnabas may have erred in separating himself to not give offense to the representatives from James. But he was probably trying to work for compromise. Both Paul and Barnabas were needed by Jesus. Each in his own way contributed to the foundation and building up of the Church.

I am reminded of the words of Jesus, from Matthew 5:

Matthew 5: ⁹ “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God.

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.

Yes, the Church does need those who will stand up for what is right, and risk the retributions that come from those in power. But in our day, it seems like the emotion of outrage has been promoted above all others. I think we need more of the spirit of Barnabas – encouragement, forgiveness, and reconciliation. There are times and places for both standing up for what is right, and also for seeking peace and reconciliation. Jesus gives us both in the Beatitudes. Let us choose wisely our ways to follow Jesus.

Amen.