

The Need for Encouragement and the Spiritual Gift of Encouragement

Acts 4:36-7; 9:26-8; 11:20-26; 13:1-4

9/6/2020

Today we close our Season of Grace, and the last of the human needs we look at is the need for encouragement. We need it from our earliest days to our last. Especially in these challenging times we need it.

Barnabas is the New Testament hero of encouragement. His name itself means “son of encouragement”. Even though encouragement is not listed in the lists of spiritual gifts, or *charismata*, in the New Testament, I believe it certainly is one, and one of the most important.

Think of people who have encouraged you when you needed it most. Who comes first to mind? Offer a little prayer of thanks for them now.

I

We meet Barnabas early in the Book of Acts. Born on the island of Cyprus, in the Mediterranean, his birth name was Joseph. He was a Levite, his family going back to Levi, the tribe of Israel given the responsibility for leadership in the worship of God. So Barnabas was a Jew of considerable standing.

When the early church began their life together in Jerusalem they “shared all things in common”, pooling their resources so all would have enough. The famous writer Justin Martyr, who wrote a generation later described his community:

We who once coveted most greedily the wealth and fortune of others, now place in common the goods we possess, dividing them with all the needy. (I Apology)

Enter Joseph the Levite from Cyprus! He sold a field he owned and gave the proceeds to the church in Jerusalem, “laying them at the apostles’ feet.” For this remarkable, act of generosity the

apostles gave him a new name, Barnabas (“son of encouragement”). For his gift to be especially mentioned shows it must have been a great boost to them, both in money and morale!

Every church I’ve known has had people whose generosity has been important in the building and sustaining of the church. These gifts say, “I believe in you!” And not just in terms of money gifts, but also in terms of time and skills and hard work.

You might be imagining even now about the men and women whose generosity has helped build and sustain this church!

Daughters and sons of encouragement!

II

The next time we see Barnabas is in Acts 9. Saul, persecutor of the church, was on his way to Damascus “breathing threats and murder”. There on the road he was blinded by a great light and a voice from heaven, that of the Risen Lord, saying, “Saul, why do you persecute me?” One of the most dramatic and consequential

conversions in Christian history had begun. After a period of discernment, he began preaching Jesus as the “Son of God”. It confounded everyone: “Isn’t he the one who was persecuting Jesus’ followers?”

It especially confounded the disciples. When Saul, now Paul, came to Jerusalem he sought to join the circle of disciples. They weren’t about to let him in. Fear arose in them: he was the enemy of the church; he had presided over the stoning of Stephen! They did not believe his conversion.

I admit, with some dismay, that I have questioned some people’s conversions in the past, especially when it helped their precarious circumstances. I falsely judged Chuck Carlson who has become a powerful witness to Christ, especially in his prison ministry. The disciples of Jesus were skeptical about Paul’s conversion and were not ready to roll out the welcome mat.

But here came Barnabas. He defended Paul to them. He went and got him and took him to the disciples and stood beside him. He told them of Paul's conversion, he attested to how powerfully and boldly Paul preached in the name of Jesus. We all need encouragers, advocates, defenders like that! Every child needs an advocate. We all do.

Paul may never have become the great apostle to the Gentiles had not Barnabas stood as his advocate.

Who in your life has stood as an advocate for you? Sometimes it has come as a defense when you are wrongly perceived. Other times it comes in the form of a good and helpful introduction. There is what I call "the ministry of introduction". You take someone and introduce them to a person who can be of great help to them. When has someone provided that "ministry of introduction" for you?

The Hebrew word for "Redeemer" literally means "Advocate." Defender. In Handel's Messiah, when the soloist sings the words of

Job in “I know that my Redeemer Liveth”, she is singing about an Advocate!

We stand by, stand with people especially when they most need it. I remember the day Pee Wee Reece, the great short-stop of the Brooklyn Dodgers took his position on the field. Across from him at second base was Jackie Robinson the first black major league baseball player. Everywhere they went that first season, Robinson was jeered, spat at, reviled. One afternoon in an opponent’s stadium the jeering and boos grew especially loud when Robinson took his position on the field. Pee Wee Reece walked over and stood beside him. That was all it took. The ugly jeers died down. Sometimes that’s all it takes. Don’t have to say a lot, just stand beside them.

III

The next time we see Barnabas is in chapter 11. A new church had begun in Antioch, and things were happening! Growth, miracles. Reports came to Jerusalem about what was going on,

including Gentiles who were coming to Christ and joining the community. The Jerusalem leaders weren't so sure about this. Gentiles just joining up!?

So they sent Barnabas to Antioch to observe what was going on, observe their worship, debrief the miracles, evaluate the conversions. Quality control. For the sake of the gospel the Jerusalem leaders could have sent no one better than Barnabas!

Barnabas arrived, and this is how the text describes what happened: "When he came and saw the grace of God, he was glad!" He saw and he rejoiced. He was, the text says, "a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and of faith". They could have sent someone of a more censorious spirit, of a theological exactitude who would not have rejoiced but would have been alarmed. But Barnabas recognized grace when he saw it, cheered it on when he saw it. He recognized the work of God as the work of God. And his report back made a difference and the Antioch community began to thrive.

We can get judgmental about those who do not worship like us or believe like us. Their worship may be too exuberant, their beliefs too this way or that, their politics suspect. But Barnabas would have none of it. As Grady Nutt once said, “There’s no competition between light houses!” He saw their joy, their fruits, their faith and rejoiced. Headquarters in Jerusalem had sent the right person.

Then guess what happened? Barnabas went and got Paul and took him to Antioch, and the two of them stayed a year there, teaching and encouraging them. Something new was happening, and Acts reports that it was there that followers of Jesus were first called “Christians”

IV

In chapter 13 we see the momentous beginning of the missionary journeys of Paul. One day the leaders in Antioch were fasting and praying. The Holy Spirit

interrupted the prayer meeting and said, “Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.” And they did. The church at Antioch layed hands on them and sent them forth. The mission to the larger Mediterranean world was begun.

VI

Now we come to the pivotal, famous Council of Jerusalem which determined the future of the young church. The great theological issue was: Did a Gentile convert have to become a full-fledged Jew in order to become a Christian?

Paul and Barnabas argued you didn't have to become a Jew first and follow every law, from dietary restrictions to circumcision. Imagine going to a new member class and in the last session the minister says, “Oh, there's one more little thing I hadn't mentioned before. Before you join you guys have to be circumcised!” Not just baptism, circumcision!

James, the brother of Jesus, head of the Jerusalem church lined up on one side, Paul and Barnabas on the other. There came a great compromise that let the Gentile mission go forward. Gentiles were to follow some of the Jewish rules but not all of them. Without Paul and Barnabas, their experience in Antioch and their open-minded, open-hearted spirit, the church might have remained a small sect of Jews following Jesus.

VII

As Paul and Barnabas set out on their missionary journeys a shift began to take place which showed the magnanimous spirit of Barnabas. At the beginning of their work together it was “Barnabas and Paul”, Barnabas taking preeminence. That’s how they were called: “Barnabas and Paul”. When they went to Lystra the crowd got carried away; they called Barnabas Zeus and Paul, the lesser god Hermes. But as they traveled around the Hellenistic world Paul began to take the lead. Barnabas knew it would happen. Paul’s prodigious intellectual gifts as preacher and interpreter of the

gospel to the Hellenistic mind and Hellenistic world made him the leader and Barnabas was overshadowed. They began to be called “Paul and Barnabas”, Paul’s name first on the marquee. Barnabas had the grace to accept second place. Only when they returned to Jerusalem would Barnabas take the lead.

True encouragers are often the ones willing to take a back seat for the sake of the cause. As someone said: It’s amazing what someone can accomplish when they don’t have to take all the credit”.

VIII

Now comes a bump in the road, a conflict that every good story has. One day Paul said, “Barnabas, let’s go on another journey and see how the churches and missions we set up are doing!” Barnabas said “Great! And let’s take John Mark with us.” But Paul said, “No way”. John Mark had abandoned them on the earlier journey and returned home. Paul didn’t want a quitter around. Barnabas wanted

to give him a second chance, a chance to redeem himself. Sharp disagreement arose. Barnabas and John Mark took off in one direction, and Paul chose Silas as his partner and headed off in another direction.

The rift between the two is told in *Galatians* from Paul's point of view. Simon Peter had come from Jerusalem to visit the church of Antioch. Following the new rules set forth about dietary restrictions, Peter ate with the Gentile converts. But when the conservative party, those Paul called the "circumcision party" traveled from Jerusalem to visit, Peter withdrew from the Gentile table and ate with the visitors. Have you ever changed tables in the school lunch room because of who you wanted to be seen with or not seen with? Peter took his lunch tray to sit with the Jerusalem leaders *and Barnabas joined him!*

Paul was livid! Their behavior was "insincere" he said. They were wavering on the progress made to include Gentiles fully into

the church. They were, in his words “not straight-forward about the truth of the gospel”. He called them cowards and hypocrites.

But was that *all* that was going on? Paul had a way of getting on his theological high horse. His theological incisiveness sometimes led to a “My Way or Trailways” kind of attitude.

Perhaps Peter and Barnabas were trying to save the relationship with the leaders in Jerusalem who had lost the theological battle. Barnabas was a relationship-kind-of-person. That was why he became Paul’s champion when Paul was under attack. Principles are important but sometimes they are at the cost of relationships. Sometimes we love our principles more than God.

The church needs theologians who see through complexities to offer clarity to define what the “truth of the gospel” is. But it needs people like Barnabas too, who can see all sides of a situation, walk in someone else’s shoes, be a bridge. Someone who can take the hand of one side of a congregation and take the other hand at the

same time, become true spiritual mediators. Barnabas was always doing that.

Conclusion

I hope you've been inspired by Barnabas today. Through him the Spirit may be calling us to be sons and daughters of encouragement, a community of encouragers. There's a name I could give you, like the disciples gave Barnabas his new name. *Barnabae!* Daughters and sons of encouragement. It may not be the most elegant name, but what a spiritual gift it is, the gift of encouragement, and what a calling for our world today.