

Barnabas: A Generous Encourager

Barnabas was an early disciple in the New Testament church. He was a Levite from Cyprus, an island in the Mediterranean Sea, about 60 miles off the coast of Israel. Barnabas later visited the island of Cyprus on the first missionary journey with the Apostle Paul, and again on a second journey with Mark.

The given name of Barnabas was “Joseph” (Acts 4:36). When Barnabas became a Christian, he sold his land and gave the money to the Jerusalem Apostles. Early in the history of the church, he went to Antioch to check on the growth of the Christians there, and then on to Tarsus. From there, he brought Saul (later named “Paul”), back to Antioch to help with the church in that city (the third largest in the Mediterranean world). Because of his good reputation, Barnabas was able to calm the fears which the believers at Jerusalem had about Saul (Acts 9:27).

Later, Barnabas and Paul (along with John Mark) were commissioned to make a missionary journey to Cyprus and the provinces of Asia Minor (Acts 13:1-4). And still later, after a difference of opinion regarding whether or not to take Mark with them on a second journey, Paul and Barnabas went their separate ways (Acts 15:36-41).

Barnabas possessed exceptional spiritual qualities. He had an unshakable confidence in God. The lesson from various parts of the Book of Acts will focus on some of the key activities in the life and experience of Barnabas.

- 1) Barnabas: a generous giver (Acts 4:36-37)
- 2) Barnabas: a faithful friend (Acts 9:26-27)
- 3) Barnabas: a committed encourager (Acts 11:22-26)
- 4) Barnabas: a forgiving brother (Acts 15:36-41)

1. Barnabas: A Generous Giver (Acts 4:36-37)

We first meet Barnabas in the fourth chapter of Acts. His name was Joseph, but the apostles called him “Barnabas,” which was an Aramaic expression meaning “son of encouragement.”

In Acts 4:37 we learn that Barnabas owned some land. Since the tribe of Levi was not to have *a land* inheritance, it seems surprising that Joseph (a Levite) owned property. But Jeremiah, who was also of a priestly family, was a property owner (according to Jeremiah 32:7-14). Apparently the law regarding land inheritances was not always observed. The text says that Barnabas sold a field which he owned, and gave the proceeds to the Apostles at Jerusalem (verse 37).

Barnabas had some financial resources. He was not married, and had no children. He sold his field and must have asked himself, “How much shall I give to the poor?” He decided *not to give* merely ten percent (or even fifty percent) — but the original language indicates that *he gave it all* to aid the poor in Jerusalem. Barnabas was a generous giver.

The church at Jerusalem was growing rapidly and believers were being added to the church daily. Because thousands of visitors were in Jerusalem at the time, there was need for material help in caring for the multitudes of people. Barnabas had land, and he decided to sell it, and give the total amount of

money to the Apostles to be used as needed. Barnabas was a generous giver, and willing to give financially to help meet the needs of the early church. This was an indication of his love for the Lord, and his faith in the people who made up the church.

The generosity of Barnabas was surely a source of encouragement for the folks who were part of the early church.

2. Barnabas: A Faithful Friend (Acts 9:26-27)

Saul (who later became Paul) was converted on his way to Damascus. After his dramatic conversion and baptism, he stayed on in Damascus and preached Christ in the synagogues there (Acts 9:20). A number of the Jews, however, “took counsel to kill him” (Acts 9:23), and so he escaped from Damascus.

When Saul was safely delivered from Damascus, he returned to Jerusalem (verse 26) — and upon his arrival in Jerusalem, he attempted “to join the disciples” there. He apparently *tried to make amends for his former hatred and persecution* by bearing witness for Christ — but the Jerusalem believers were filled with skepticism and fear. They knew what he had done to the church not too long before — breathing out threats of murder against new believers.

The Jerusalem disciples were afraid of Saul, and were not willing to believe that he was a true follower of Christ. However, bighearted Barnabas “took” Saul and “brought him to the apostles” (verse 27) — and told them about Saul’s conversion, and how he preached boldly in Damascus. After Barnabas had testified in behalf of Saul, and explained the change that had taken place in his life, Saul was able to move about freely in the Christian circles at Jerusalem (verse 28).

It was Barnabas who brought Saul to Peter and James and the other leaders of the Jerusalem church, and enabled Saul to be accepted by the church there. Saul began contending for the faith among Greek-speaking Jews (verse 29), but it wasn’t long until the brethren shipped him home to Tarsus (verse 30), where he remained for seven or eight years — until he was brought back to Antioch to help with the work of the church there.

We observe then that Barnabas was not only a man to be trusted with money, but he also was a faithful friend who took the risk of associating with Saul of Tarsus, in those early days soon after Saul’s conversion. Barnabas was an encourager of Saul, who later became a dynamic leader in the early church.

3. Barnabas: A Committed Encourager (Acts 11:22-26)

Some Christians who were “scattered” because of persecution (Acts 11:19), went north to Antioch (the third largest city in the Roman Empire, next to Rome and Alexandria), and preached the Gospel to the Jews living in that city. The “hand of the Lord was with them” (verse 21), and tidings of what was happening at Antioch “reached the ears of the church at Jerusalem” (verse 22).

The leaders of the church at Jerusalem were concerned about whether evangelizing Gentiles was a proper thing to do, and so they sent Barnabas “to go as far as Antioch.” When Barnabas arrived in Antioch, he was so blessed by what he saw that he encouraged them to keep pressing on in the faith. Barnabas was so fully consecrated to the Lord that he rejoiced to see anyone (even Gentiles) accepting Christ as their Savior. Barnabas “exhorted” (encouraged) the people at Antioch to stay true to the Lord

(verse 23). The text says that when he came to Antioch and saw the evidence of the grace of God, (he) was glad, and encouraged all the believers *“that with purpose of heart they would cleave unto the Lord.”*

The verb “encouraged” (exhorted) is in *the imperfect tense*, which means that he repeatedly encouraged them to persevere in their loyalty to God. When Barnabas encouraged the people at Antioch to “cleave to the Lord,” he was saying, *“Remain true to the Lord with all your hearts.”*

They were not to cling to sports, or to get thrilled with entertainment. Rather — as the *Goodspeed* translation says it, *“[He] encouraged them all to be resolute and steadfast in their devotion to the Lord.”* The *Living Bible* paraphrase says, *“[Barnabas] encouraged the believers to stay close to the Lord, whatever the cost.”* Barnabas rejoiced to see the grace of God at work in the far north city of Antioch, and he did all he could to inspire the people with strength and confidence.

Acts 11:23-24 is a good pair of verses to commit to memory. If I knew when I would die and go to be with the Lord — and I had one last opportunity to preach a sermon, verse 23 is the text I would choose. These are tremendous words of exhortation for God’s people in every age.

The description of Barnabas (in verse 24) is about as noble a portrayal as could be made of any human being. The writer of the Book of Acts says of Barnabas: “For he was a good man, full of the Holy Ghost and of faith.” The three characteristics named here about Barnabas have become the major points in many a funeral sermon. A preacher is always happy when he can say those things about a member of his church who has been promoted to the eternal world.

He was a good man — he was generous and tenderhearted, a man of proven character and high moral standards. Barnabas was an honorable, respectable, and morally sound man.

He was full of the Holy Spirit — that is, he had experienced an endowment of power for witnessing and service. He was not driven by personal ambition and selfish desires. He was willing to work and let others get the credit.

He was overflowing with faith — he had strong convictions and a settled confidence in the reliability of God’s Word. He believed that God is able to transform persons who come to the Lord Jesus in faith and repentance.

As the church continued to grow, and many believers were being added to the Body, additional help was needed in the teaching ministry of the church. The task at Antioch was getting too great for Barnabas, and so he went to Tarsus (125 miles northwest of Antioch) “to seek for Saul” (verse 25). After a search was made, Saul was found, and Barnabas brought him to Antioch (verse 26).

It is good to note here, that any leader who realizes his limitations, and is willing to bring in an associate to help — shows the marks of wisdom and of an unselfish spirit. And for a whole year, Barnabas and Saul taught the people at Antioch. As a result, “the disciples were called Christians first in Antioch” (verse 26b).

Earlier, they had been called “brethren” (Acts 1:16), “disciples” (Acts 6:1), “saints” (Acts 9:13), and “believers” (Acts 10:45). Now they were called “Christians,” probably because the believers were frequently talking about One whom they called “the Christ.” The term may also have been used because the conduct and attitudes of the believers reminded their neighbors of what they had heard about Christ.

The term “Christian” occurs only twice again in the entire New Testament. Agrippa said to Paul, “Almost thou persuadest me to be a Christian” (Acts 26:28), and the Apostle Peter wrote, “Yet if any [one] suffer as a Christian (that is, for doing right), let him not be ashamed” (1 Peter 4:16). It seems that the word “Christian” was used primarily by outsiders, not so much by the believers themselves.

In the period which followed the events of chapter 11, the church in Antioch was led by the Spirit to commission Barnabas and Saul to carry the message of the Gospel into the farther reaches of the Empire.

Barnabas came from Cyprus, and so that’s where they went first. He had friends, and probably relatives who lived on the island — and he wanted them to hear the Gospel. They took John Mark with them, but when they got to the region of Pamphylia, Mark decided to turn around and go home.

4. Barnabas: A Forgiving Brother (Acts 15:36-41)

In the last section we consider today, Paul suggested to Barnabas that they re-visit the churches which they had established on the first missionary journey (verse 36).

Paul was concerned about the welfare of the new believers, and he wanted to check up on their progress. Barnabas heartily approved of the idea, but he wanted to take Mark along with them (verse 37). Paul thought that was *not* a good idea (verse 38), since Mark had gone along with them on the first missionary journey, and then gave up and quit when they came to the rugged mountain regions on the southern coast of Turkey. Paul was inclined to be firm, while Barnabas preferred to be tender, and the difference of opinion caused a split between the two spiritual giants. Barnabas thought that Mark had learned his lesson, and that he should have another chance. Paul insisted that they needed a reliable person who could stand up under persecution and hardship.

Possibly *one of the two* could have given in, but Barnabas would not give up *support* for his *nephew* (his sister’s son), and Paul would not give up his *convictions* (about Mark’s lack of dedication) — and so the two went their separate ways. In this case, that step turned out to be a blessing, because now two teams were evangelizing. Paul and Silas went to Syria and Cilicia (verse 41). Barnabas and Mark went back to Cyprus (verse 39).

Barnabas chose to encourage Mark, a young man who didn’t have many friends. Barnabas must have said to himself, “John Mark needs me; if I don’t help him now, he may never amount to anything.” And so Barnabas took Mark with him, and they went back to re-visit churches that had been established on the earlier missionary journey. Tradition says that Barnabas stayed on the island of Cyprus until his death.

It is important to note that there were no nasty fights or bitter feelings between Paul and Barnabas. Paul later spoke very kindly about Barnabas (1 Corinthians 9:6). Paul also was convinced that Mark became a mature disciple of Jesus, and wrote to Timothy, encouraging him to come visit him in prison — and then he said (in essence), “Bring Mark with you because he is useful for ministry” (see 2 Timothy 4:11).

Barnabas truly deserves the highest commendation for his generous Christian spirit, and for his contribution toward the ongoing life and ministry of the early church. Had it not been for the unselfish concern of Barnabas, *Paul* might never have been accepted in the Jerusalem church, and *Mark* may have

decided to give up serving the Lord. Instead, both men persevered, and more than half of the New Testament was written by them — thirteen epistles written by Paul, and one Gospel written by Mark.

We will remember Barnabas as a man disposed to kindness. He was a man with a *warm heart* and an *open hand*.

Barnabas was a faithful friend, a committed encourager, a forgiving brother, and one who gave generously to help the poor. The Bible says, *“He that hath pity upon the poor lendeth unto the LORD; and that which he hath given will [the Lord] pay him again”* (Proverbs 19:17). Giving to the poor pays rich dividends.

A young man *was selling goods to help pay his way* through school. He had only one coin left that day, and he was hungry.

He decided he would ask for a meal at the next house. However, he lost nerve when the lady opened the door — and so instead, asked only for a glass of water.

She thought he looked hungry, and so she brought him a large glass of milk.

He drank it slowly, and then he said, *“How much do I owe you?”*

“You don’t owe me anything,” the woman replied. “Mother taught us never to accept pay for a kindness.”

The lad said, “Then I thank you from my heart.”

The boy’s name was Howard Kelly. As he left that house, he not only felt stronger physically, but *his faith in God* and *his love for people* were stronger also.

Years later, *that woman* became critically ill. The local doctors sent her to the big city, *where they called in specialists*.

Dr. Howard Kelly was called in for the consultation. When he heard the name of the town from which she came, he immediately went to the room where she lay. Dressed in his doctor’s gown, Kelly went in to see her. He recognized her face, and went back to the consultation room, determined to do his very best to save her life.

From that day, Kelly gave special attention to the case, and the woman recovered and was able to go home. Kelly requested the business office *to pass the final bill on to him* for approval. He looked at the bill, wrote something on the edge of it — and it was sent to her home.

She feared opening the invoice when it came. She was sure it would take the rest of her life to pay it all. When she opened the envelope, something caught her attention on the side of the bill.

She read these words: *“Paid in full — with one glass of milk.”*

It was signed — “Dr. Howard Kelly.”

Giving to the poor, my friends, is a good investment. It pays rich dividends. Once again — the Bible says that *when you help the poor*, you are lending to the Lord — and He pays *wonderful interest* on your loan.

The woman who gave a glass of milk to a school boy working his way through college was richly rewarded.

Barnabas, in our lesson today, deserves a spot with other *noted* New Testament saints — a disciple of Jesus on the level with Paul and John, and Peter and James. Each generation [in the ongoing march of the church] needs more saints like Barnabas — people who give generously, and encourage others to persevere in the faith.

I pray that the qualities demonstrated in the life of Barnabas will more and more be true about each reader of this message.

-Harold S. Martin

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