
Barnabas – The Encourager

Acts 11:25

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Introduction

Tonight we take time to consider the life of Barnabas. As I began preparing for this message I realized that I did not know all that much about Barnabas. I knew that we had been nicknamed the “Son of Encouragement” and that he spent a great deal of time with Paul, but otherwise the details were rather sketchy. So I thought we would start out by doing a brief survey of Barnabas’ life. This survey will then set the context for considering more closely several events in the life of Barnabas and those he partnered with in ministry. It is from these considerations that we will make several observations and applications for our own lives.

A little more consideration of how this sermon will influence us...

Life of Barnabas

Let’s walk together through the life of Barnabas and develop a bird’s eye perspective on his life and his times. I want to briefly survey his life with you as a biographer might as they outlined the major events of their subjects’ life. As we do, keep in mind that Luke, the author of Acts, the book in which we find the bulk of references to Barnabas, purposefully selected and made decisions about what he would choose to tell us about Barnabas. This “material” on Barnabas then, if you will, comes to us not only in the context of the blossoming of the first century church but also with the intention of the Holy Spirit as He guided Luke that we learn from what was written (1 Corinthians 10; 2 Timothy 3:16). So we must not regard the mentions of Barnabas as incidental to the storyline, but rather as the record of a man’s character and activity from which we are to be both inspired and instructed in glorifying God.

We can divide the mentions of Barnabas in the Scripture into 3 basic movements: Luke’s Introduction of Barnabas, Barnabas’ Ministry with Paul, and Barnabas Following His Split with Paul.

Luke’s Introduction of Barnabas

In Luke’s introduction of Barnabas, we are given three introductory vignettes that set the stage for the appreciation certain elements of Barnabas’ character that will typify his ministry throughout the rest of the Scriptural account. Barnabas is first introduced to us in Acts 4 near the advent of the early church, sometime shortly after Jesus death between 33 and 37 AD. Acts 4:32-37 reads:

Now the full number of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one said that any of the things that belonged to him was his own, but they had everything in common.³³ And with great power the apostles were giving their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all.³⁴ There was not a needy person among them, for as many as

were owners of lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold³⁵ and laid it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need.³⁶ Thus Joseph, who was also called by the apostles Barnabas (which means son of encouragement), a Levite, a native of Cyprus,³⁷ sold a field that belonged to him and brought the money and laid it at the apostles' feet.

This is early in the history of the church shortly after many had been saved in Jerusalem and many at this time were selling personal items to meet the needs of other believers. Barnabas is not the only one engaging in this practice, but he is the one that Luke chooses to identify and give us some personal information about. Apparently, Barnabas was already well known to the apostles as he had been given a nickname by them. His true name, Joseph, had been replaced by “Barnabas,” which is the Greek word *paraklesis*, meaning to call along side, capable to encourage, exhort, comfort, or console. This is the title that is used throughout the rest of Acts by Luke and by Paul in his writing in the rest of the New Testament.

The next time we hear of Barnabas is in Acts 9:26-31:

²⁶And 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.²⁸ So he went in and out among them at Jerusalem, preaching boldly in the name of the Lord.²⁹ And he spoke and disputed against the Hellenists.^[2] But they were seeking to kill him.³⁰ And when the brothers learned this, they brought him down to Caesarea and sent him off to Tarsus.³¹ So the church throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria had peace and was being built up. And walking in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, it multiplied

In AD 37, Barnabas resurfaces in Luke’s storyline as the one who brings Paul to the apostles and convinces them of his genuine conversion. [B.G.: Shortly after Paul’s Damascus Road conversion he began sharing the gospel after spending some time with followers in Damascus. Paul grows in power, but ministering only to the Jews at this point. Paul flees Damascus after a plot to kill him is uncovered. He goes to Jerusalem and attempts to join the disciples there. They would not believe he was a disciple. Barnabas steps in and takes Paul to the apostles (“took him and brought him”) (and then “declared to [the apostles]”) and told them Paul’s story, in effect stating his belief in the truth of Paul’s conversion.]

Finally, in Luke’s introduction of Barnabas, we see Barnabas being sent out by the apostles to minister to the new believer’s in Antioch shortly after he brings Paul to the Apostles (AD 46/47). In this account, Luke gives us the most succinct yet descriptive account in all of Scripture of the man Barnabas, Acts 11:19-26:

¹⁹Now 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 no one except Jews.²⁰ But there were some of them, men of Cyprus and Cyrene, who on coming to Antioch spoke to the Hellenists^[2] also,

preaching the Lord Jesus. ²¹And the hand of the Lord was with them, and a great number who believed turned to the Lord. ²²The report of this came to the ears of the church in Jerusalem, and they sent Barnabas to Antioch. ²³When 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, ²⁴for he was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and of faith. And a great many people were added to the Lord. ²⁵So Barnabas went to Tarsus to look for Saul, ²⁶and when he had found him, he brought him to Antioch. For a whole year they met with the church and taught a great many people. And in Antioch the disciples were first called Christians.

Not only do we see Barnabas *sent* by the church here, we see Barnabas enlisting the help of Paul, who had been sent to Tarsus by the disciples in Jerusalem for his own safety. The fruit of the Holy Spirit's labor through them is realized over the year they spend together there. Here in Antioch begins Barnabas and Paul's ministry together.

Barnabas' Ministry with Paul

At the end of the year in ministry in Antioch, Barnabas and Paul are asked to take a gift from the church in Antioch to the church in Jerusalem. When they return to Antioch, they bring John Mark with them, the same John Mark who wrote the book of Mark. He is Barnabas' cousin and presumably some one younger in the faith than Barnabas and Paul. Shortly after returning, the Holy Spirit speaks to the church in Antioch and instructs the believers there to "set apart" Barnabas and Paul for missionary work, in what would eventually become a ministry to the gentiles. Acts 13:1-3

¹Now there were in the church at Antioch prophets and teachers, Barnabas, Simeon who was called Niger,^[1] Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen a member of the court of Herod the tetrarch, and Saul. ²While 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." ³Then after fasting and praying they laid their hands on them and sent them off.

We can not trace Barnabas and Paul throughout the entirety of what is commonly known as Paul's First Missionary Journey. We can track them from Acts 13-15 throughout their entire course. There are several important observations that can be made along the way:

Antioch to Seleucia to Paphos (on Cyprus). In Paphos, while sharing the gospel with the proconsul and a local magician who wanted to turn the proconsul away from the truth, an important change occurs. This local magician, Elymas, is rebuked sternly by Paul and made to be blind for a time. As a result of this act of power, the proconsul believes. Also as a result of this act, a transition takes place. The Scriptures from this point on excepting two incidents, reverses the order of mention. Whereas previously it had always been Paul and Barnabas, it is now Barnabas and Paul. Luke changes focus. Paul now becomes the focus of the narrative. Acts 13:13, immediately following

the blinding of the magician, states, “Now *Paul and his companions* set sail from Paphos...”

Paphos to Perga to Antioch in Pisidia. Two events to note in this leg of the journey. First, John Mark, who had been with them since they were sent out from Antioch, abandons the mission and returns to Jerusalem (Acts 13:13). Second, Antioch in Pisidia is where the Paul and Barnabas start to first encounter serious resistance to their ministry.

Iconium to Lystra to Derbe (and back to Lystra, Iconium, and Antioch in Pisidia). In these cities Paul and Barnabas encounter heavy resistance, even up to the level of Paul being stoned and left for dead (Acts 14:19ff). Through all of this, however, Paul and Barnabas continue to proclaim the good news, see converts made, and establish churches. They even return to those cities in which they were driven out of to be sure that the young believers were strengthened, encouraged, and that elders were installed.

Antioch in Pisidia to Pamphylia to Attalia to Antioch (sending church). Paul and Barnabas wrap up their trip by returning to their sending church and giving a report of their work, “declaring all God had done with them and how he had opened a door of faith to the Gentiles” (Acts 14:27). All in all, Paul and Barnabas spend 1 to 1 ½ years together on their missionary journey. Subsequently, Paul and Barnabas attend the Jerusalem Council and argue strongly relating God’s work among the Gentiles. Paul and Barnabas return to their sending church in Antioch in Acts 15

Barnabas Following His Split with Paul

Acts 15:36-41

Paul and Barnabas prepare to go on second missionary journey revisiting the churches that were established on the first missionary journey.

They disagree about whether or not to take John Mark, who abandoned the work on the first journey. (AD 49)

They go separate ways, Paul taking Silas and Barnabas taking John Mark.

After this time, there are only several other mentions of Barnabas in the New Testament and Luke’s focus remains primarily with Paul.

1 Corinthians 9:6

Paul is discussing his refusal to receive support for his missionary work so that it could not be said that he was motivated by money. He mentions that Barnabas also utilizes this same practice. Either Paul is referring to the first missionary journey or Paul and Barnabas remain in contact and aware of each others’ practices. And this is around AD 54, some years after the split, when Paul is writing to the Corinthians.

Galatians 2:1, 2:9, 2:13

Paul makes mention of Barnabas at several points recounting his role in his own early ministry. And the shares “so that *even* Barnabas was led astray by

their hypocrisy” Gal 2: 13). Barnabas had fallen into the trap of treating the Gentiles differently when in the presence of Jews.

A few things are clear from these subsequent mentions. First, Paul clearly maintained a high regard for Barnabas even after their split. Secondly, John Mark, the man over whom Paul and Barnabas disputed, later become integral to the ministry of the early church in the NT. Paul instructs the Colossians to “welcome him” (Colossians 4:10). Peter calls Mark “my son” in his own letter (1 Peter 5:13), and Paul, toward the end of his ministry (and some 15-20 years after the split with Barnabas), requests that Mark be brought to him because, “he is very useful to me for ministry” (2 Timothy 4:11).

What can we learn from this consideration of Barnabas life? What observations can we make about his biography? How might they inform us at Clearcreek Chapel as we partner in ministry with others?

Partners in Ministry

So why did Luke spend all this time recording these details about Barnabas? So that we could learn from them of course. Consider these four aspects of Barnabas life.

Character Worth Writing About

Proverbs 27:19 reads, “As in water face **reflects** face, so the heart of man **reflects** the man.” Why was Luke so drawn to Barnabas? He was not an apostle in the strict sense, he clearly fades into the background shortly after Paul begins his first missionary journey, and he wrote no books of the Bible. In part, I believe that Luke tells us so much about Barnabas because Barnabas was a man worth telling about. It is clear from early on in the church Barnabas’ character stood out. He had been nicknamed by the apostles – The Encourager during the days shortly after Pentecost when *many* were being saved. Today we might nickname someone for their physical characteristics, such as Shorty or Butch, or occasionally for some negative dispositional quality such as Grumpy, but rarely do we nickname someone for a positive quality such as “Encourager”. Not only does Barnabas receive such a nickname, but both Luke and Paul choose to use it throughout the whole of the NT. There was something about the way that Barnabas consistently treated people that caught the attention of the apostles, Luke, and Paul.

As mentioned earlier, the most succinct and cogent description of the person of Barnabas can be found in Acts 11:23 – 24. Here Luke tells us that Barnabas, as he exhorted the believers in Antioch to remain faithful to the Lord with steadfast purpose, was a “good man full of the Holy Spirit and faith.” Beth pls see sentence construction Greek. In fact, the reason that Barnabas exhorted the believers this way was because he was a good man – and what made Barnabas a good man? Barnabas did not receive faith and the Holy Spirit *because* he was a good man. The Holy Spirit and faith *made* Barnabas a good man. This fullness of the Holy Spirit and faith produced in Barnabas an apparent natural bent toward encouragement and exhortation of the believers toward faithfulness and steadfast purposefulness in their commitment to the Lord.

So we see that Barnabas “was the way he was” because of the goodness produced in him by the Holy Spirit and faith, but I think there is another angle that we should appreciate as we try to understand why Barnabas’ impact in the NT is so profound. I believe there was something about the way that Barnabas viewed other believers that caused him to be who he was. And I believe that this view of other believers is directly related to his view of God – as is all of life.

Was Barnabas perfect? No more so than any one else. We know that Barnabas and Paul had at least two “run-ins.” The first is mentioned in Galatians 2:11-14 where Barnabas loses his orientation and along with Peter seriously sins against his Gentile brothers. They are publicly rebuked by Paul. And then the “sharp disagreement” between Paul and Barnabas over John Mark also occurred. The parting ways itself is not in and of itself wrong, honest and sincere men had honest and sincerely different opinions. They part ways, God uses them both (and John Mark). Only what occurred during the “sharp disagreement” (Acts 15:39) in as much as interpersonal sin may have been involved is disheartening. There is every reason to believe, however, in the evidence that the rest of Scriptures gives us that a mutual respect and friendship was maintained between Paul and Barnabas even after these disagreements. (The rebuke in Gal. 2 likely occurred before the separation over John Mark and even in this Paul speaks respectfully, note v. 13 and use of *even Barnabas*. Further, Paul’s mention of Barnabas in 1 Corinthians 6:9 and Col. 4:10 both likely occurred after the split, suggesting a maintained relationship.)

Capacity for Seeing and Being Made Glad by the Grace of God in Others’ Lives

I think the first clue can be found in this same passage, Acts 11:23 – 24, notice closely vv. 22-23:

²²The report of this came to the ears of the church in Jerusalem, and they sent Barnabas to Antioch. ²³When 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,

The church of Jerusalem hears of the good consequences of the stoning of Stephen – a strange way to think of it, but it is clear that one of the consequences of this tragedy was the spreading of the gospel to further regions and to people groups other than the Jews. Upon hearing, their minds turn to Barnabas. An individual trusted as one who can teach, preach, and encourage the new believers in Antioch. When Barnabas arrives, Luke tells us, “he...saw the grace of God [and was] glad.” Barnabas is quite simply made glad by seeing the power of God transform the lives of the believers in Antioch. He savors and rejoices in the opportunity to see life-changing, God-derived, grace in action in the hearts and lives of believers. I believe that this is at the core of why Barnabas is known as “The Encourager.” Consider several other examples of a man who loves to highlight the grace of God as it is exemplified, or in some cases, hoped for, in other peoples’ lives.

Barnabas, convinced of the grace of God radically transforming Paul on the Damascus road, “took him and brought him to the apostles and declared to them...” (Acts 9:26-31). This is after the apostles had refused to allow Paul to join them because they were afraid.

Later we see Barnabas, after being sent to Antioch by the church, again remembering Paul who was in Tarsus after being sent there by the believers in Jerusalem for his own safety. Barnabas goes and once again takes Paul and “brought him to Antioch” (Acts 11:26). Paul had been in Tarsus for somewhere between 7 and 9 years at this point. Barnabas has not forgotten this Christian-killing ex Pharisee-henchman any more than he has forgotten the grace of God. In fact, it is this action by Barnabas that effectively launches Paul into his career as a missionary and as a man who is used by God mightily in many, many ways. Perhaps Paul’s mind had wandered back to Barnabas when he penned Philippians 1:3-7, as someone who not only believe in these truths for his own life, but was able to believe in them for the lives of others.

³I thank my God in all my remembrance of you, ⁴always in every prayer of mine for you all making my prayer with joy, ⁵because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now. ⁶And I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ. ⁷**It is right for me to feel *this way* about you all, because I hold you in my heart, for you are all partakers with me of grace,** both in my imprisonment and in the defense and confirmation of the gospel.

Lastly, we can briefly consider the case of John Mark. How much clearer can the pattern be? Barnabas, against the better judgment of Paul and perhaps even the church in Antioch, takes John Mark on what would have been his second missionary journey with Paul, while Paul takes Silas and heads a different direction. Barnabas, again convinced of the power of God’s grace to change lives, stands by the deserter, John Mark, convinced of better things. And indeed better things came – John Mark authors the book of Mark, he becomes profitable to Paul and is one of the last persons Paul call for near the end of his life (2 Timothy 4:11), and Peter comes to regard him as “my son” (1 Peter 5:13).

A few observations on this particular quality of Barnabas are in order here. First, some might say that Barnabas was a “risk-taker.” After all, Paul may have been a spy and John Mark a true “loser”. But was Barnabas really taking a *risk* by hoping in grace in the view of a sovereign God? Perhaps not. Second, we cannot separate encouragement from Christ. Apart from Christ, there is no basis for gladness in seeing the grace of God. Whatever good we see, whatever change we witness, is a temporal illusion. Barnabas, undoubtedly, was convinced of the work of Christ and its consequent benefit for believers. This is what enabled him to truly be glad in the witnessing of the grace of God and to exhort believers to remain faithful and steadfast in their Godward purposes. Barnabas rejoiced because what he witnessed pointed him to Christ – not to man.

Glad & Ready Abandonment of the Temporal

Throughout his ministry Barnabas exhibited a readiness to part with the temporal things in exchange for eternal ends. When we meet Barnabas in Acts 4 he is selling property to supply the needs of the believers in the new church. We see Barnabas regularly submitting himself to the ministry of the gospel and the needs of the body as he willingly goes to Antioch from Jerusalem to serve and teach the new believers there at the request of the apostles. He remains there for approximately a year. He then sets out with Paul on his first missionary journey as he was sent by the church in Antioch, this journey not only takes 1-2 years, but also repeatedly puts him in harms way (Acts 13-15). Barnabas also carried money and letters between churches. In 1 Corinthians 9:6, Paul tells us that Barnabas refused to accept monetary reimbursement for his ministry lest he be accused of “doing it for the money,” freely giving up what was rightfully his. In all, Barnabas probably dedicated over 20 years of his life to the work of the ministry.

Barnabas was a man who consistently and readily disentangled himself from all that would tie him to this world for the cause of the Gospel and good of the body.

Vision for the Spreading of the Gospel and the Growth of the Church

A final quality we can note about Barnabas is his direct involvement in carrying out the great commission as described in Matthew 28:18-20, making disciples in all nations, and Acts 1:8 as witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth. Barnabas was active in Jerusalem and throughout Asia Minor. He was instrumental in the events and the issues that led to the clear proclamation of the gospel to the Jews and then the Gentiles including settling the issue of Gentile circumcision. And he was certainly involved in the preparation and encouragement of those who would go on to help in fulfilling the great commission. So Barnabas involved himself in the growth of the church geographically, theologically, and practically.

It is also important to note that across the years of church growth that Barnabas witnessed and aided, he knew how to fade into the background when it was necessary, and how to step into the fray when it was necessary. As we noted earlier, Barnabas steps out of the leading role in the ministry team shortly after the beginning of Paul’s first missionary journey. He is always, however, there teaching and preaching with Paul, enduring many of the same hardships, and being there to help Paul after such severe events as stoning (as in Lystra – Acts 14: 19-23). He steps into the fray when supporting Paul at his introduction to the Apostles, advocating for John Mark, and arguing against Gentile circumcision at the Jerusalem council. Barnabas had a distinct sense of 2 Timothy 4:2 where Paul is instructing Timothy, perhaps as Barnabas himself instructed Paul or John Mark, “preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching.

Principles for Ministry

Our observations from his character and conduct.

1. True Christian character is born of Christ and His work applied, not values education or character development
2. At the heart of encouraging others is our own appreciation of the grace of God
3. Effective ministry is marked by a disentanglement with the things valued on earth and an entanglement with the treasures of heaven
4. Effective ministry happens through the thoughtful, systematic, planned, and purposeful advancement of the church and the gospel through missions, continual growth in our understanding of God and His Word, and the discipleship and development of other believers to carry on the work.

