**Bethel Christian Fellowship**

**Fair Lawn, NJ**

**Paul’s Treasured Friendships (1): “Barnabas, Son of Encouragement”**

**Acts 4:36-37; 9:27; 11:22-30; 12:25; 13:1-14:28**

**(Part 1)**

**August 20, 2023**

“Encouragement is something *everyone can do*,” an old friend once wrote; “And encouragement is something *everyone must have*. Every Christian is called upon to encourage others. And contrary to what you may be thinking, *you* are not an exception” (Dr. Sam Storms, To Love Mercy).

Encouragement is also something everyone must *receive*. Imagine what any church would be like if only a handful of its members was committed to encouraging others with words of appreciation and praise, and practical demonstrations of love and acceptance. There are times when everyone needs to know that *someone* cares.

That’s why it’s so reassuring to know that even the great encourager, the Apostle Paul, needed encouragement. As we may recall, during his final imprisonment Paul wrote these rather urgent words to Timothy: “*Do your best to come to me quickly, for Demas, having loved this present world, has deserted me and gone to Thessalonica. Crescens has gone to Galatia, and Titus to Dalmatia. Only Luke is with me. Get Mark and bring him with you, because he is helpful to me in my ministry*” (2 Tim. 4:9-11).

At the time he wrote those words, Paul knew that the Lord was at his side, strengthening and sustaining him (4:16-17). Yet he longed for the encouraging presence of his friends. Why? Because it’s not a question of *either* Christ *or* Christian friends. It was Christ encouraging Paul *through* Christian friends. Their encouraging presence was the means by which the Lord Jesus would strengthen and sustain him during his final and most severe test!

But what’s most encouraging about Paul’s ministry is to see how *many* supportive and encouraging friends he had. There are at least 100 different men and women named in Acts and in Paul’s letters who were part of his circle of friends. In the words of Wiersbe, “What is the significance of this? It shows that Paul was a friend-maker as well as a soul winner. He did not try to live an isolated life; he had friends in the Lord, and he appreciated them. They were a help to him personally and to his ministry” (Be Right: Romans).

There were some, however, who proved to be his staunchest and closest friends. They come from diverse cultural backgrounds and with varied gifts and achievements, yet they were united in their support of Paul. There are no less than seven men (and one amazing woman) who were among his treasured friendships, and each one has a great deal to teach us: (1) Barnabas; (2) Silas; (3) Luke; (4) Timothy; (5) Priscilla and Aquila; (6) Titus; (7) John Mark.

Today we begin with Barnabas, a Levite from Cyprus. He was a cousin of John Mark (Col. 4:10), whose mother’s home was a meeting place for Christians in Jerusalem (Acts 12:12). He was also “*a good man*,” says Luke, “*full of the Holy Spirit and faith*” (Acts 11:24). His story is told in the book of Acts, where Luke presents a number of important “snapshots” of his life. In part one of our study, we’ll take a look at the first five of these photos.

**A. He Had a Sacrificial and Generous Spirit (Acts 4:36-37).** “*Joseph, a Levite from Cyprus, whom the apostles called Barnabas (which means Son of Encouragement), sold a field he owned and brought the money and put it at the apostles’ feet*.” The reason Barnabas is introduced at this point in the book of Acts is because he is an outstanding example of the “great grace” that characterized the early church in Jerusalem (Acts 4:33). Many were selling various pieces of property and donating the proceeds to help the poor as the needs would arise. The sacrificial spirit and loving generosity of Joseph caught the apostles’ attention. As a result, they nicknamed him “Barnabas,” which Luke explains means “Son of Encouragement.” From that moment on, Luke will never refer to him by his original name. A warm heart and a willingness to help those in need of encouragement will be his spiritual trademark.

**B. He Was the First Sponsor of Saul (Acts 9:26-27).** “*When he (Saul) came to Jerusalem, he tried to join the disciples, but they were afraid of him, not believing that he really was a disciple. But Barnabas took him and brought him to the apostles. He told them how Saul on his journey had seen the Lord and that the Lord had spoken to him, and how in Damascus he had preached fearlessly in the name of Jesus*.” When Saul suddenly reappeared in Jerusalem three years after his conversion (Gal. 1:18-19), no one believed in his spiritual transformation – except Barnabas. He took hold of Saul, brought him to the church leaders, and convinced them that he was both a believer and an apostle. As a result, the fears and suspicions of the brethren were relieved, and the Jerusalem church received Saul into their fellowship. We don’t need to find some “hidden reason” for this; it was just within his spiritual DNA.

**C. He Was a Leader in the Church at Antioch (Acts 11:19-26).** “*Now those who had been scattered by the persecution in connection with Stephen traveled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus and Antioch, telling the message only to Jews. Some of them however . . . went to Antioch and began to speak to Greeks also, telling them the good news about the Lord Jesus. The Lord’s hand was with them, and a great number of people believed and turned to the Lord. News of this reached the ears of the church in Jerusalem, and they sent Barnabas to Antioch. When he arrived and saw evidence of the grace of God, he was glad and encouraged them all to remain true to the Lord with all their hearts. He was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and faith, and a great number of people were brought to the Lord*. *Then Barnabas went to Tarsus to look for Saul, and when he found him, he brought him to Antioch. So, for a whole year Barnabas and Saul met with the church and taught great numbers of people. The disciples were called Christians first at Antioch.*”

Antioch was the capital of Syria, 300 miles north of Jerusalem. When the elders commissioned Barnabas to travel there and find out what was going on among the Gentiles, he lived up to his nickname, “Son of Encouragement.” How? First, he rejoiced at the grace of God at work among the Gentiles. Worshipping with them would have been a new experience for him, and yet he fit right in. He encouraged the saints to remain steadfast in their faith, and because he himself was a man of faith and filled with the Spirit, he made a great impact on the church’s witness. A great number of people were coming to Christ. They weren’t “brought to the church;” they were “brought to the Lord.”

Second, Barnabas then encouraged Saul. How? He realized he needed help to minister in such a large and growing church. So he left for Tarsus “to look for Saul.” He had to search hard for him (he didn’t have a current address in his iPhone), but he “found him,” told him the story of the explosive growth in Antioch – “*and brought him to Antioch*.” He gave the forgotten Saul the opportunity to share his labors in the mainstream ministry of the gospel of Christ. Over the next year “Barnabas and Saul” had the privilege of ministering together, and the city of Antioch took note of what was happening. For the first time the followers of Christ were called “Christians,” which means, “belonging to Christ.”

It's important to realize that when Barnabas brought Saul to Antioch, Saul had been converted for about ten years. The New Testament does not tell us what he did after he left Jerusalem, other than return home to Tarsus (Acts 9:28-30; Galatians 1:21). **Q.** What was he doing all this time? **A.** From all that we can tell he was living in the *shadows of obscurity*, far removed from the activity and excitement in Antioch.

He may have been ministering by himself in the Roman province of Cilicia (Cf. Acts 15:23, 41; Gal. 1:21), where Tarsus was located. If he was witnessing in the synagogues, he would not be having an easy time of it. In the words of one author, “By now his immediate family had

probably thrown him out of their home. The leaders of the synagogue had flogged him repeatedly, excommunicating him from Judaism. He probably found refuge in some Gentile homes, learning to appreciate and enjoy their food and lifestyle. He is growing and learning as God is preparing him for exceptional ministry in the future” (Charles Swindoll, Paul). If Barnabas was not big enough to share his effective teaching ministry in Antioch, Paul never would have begun his own extensive and “exceptional ministry.” In God’s providence, Barnabas is now the most important and influential person in his life. From this point on, we shall never know how much Paul owed Barnabas.

**D. He was the Bearer of Relief (Acts 11:27-30).** “*During this time some prophets came down from Jerusalem to Antioch. One of them, named Agabus, stood up and through the Spirit predicted that a severe famine would spread over the entire Roman world . . . The disciples, each according to his ability, decided to provide help for the brothers living in Judea. This they did, sending their gift to the elders by Barnabas and Saul*.” Luke’s order of the names of these two delegates (Barnabas and Saul) is significant. It indicates that the church in Antioch selected Barnabas to head the delegation. “It is worth noting that he was trusted in this financial ministry. Those who sent the gift knew that it was being put into the hands of a faithful representative” (as quoted in Hiebert, In Paul’s Shadow). When they had completed their mission, Barnabas and Saul returned to Antioch “*and took with them John, whose surname was Mark*” (Acts 12:25).

**E. He was the Initial Leader of the First Missionary Journey (Acts 13:1-3).** “*In the church at Antioch there were prophets and teachers: Barnabas, Simeon called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen . . . and Saul. 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. So after they fasted and prayed, they placed their hands on them and sent them off*.”

Once again, Barnabas’ name came first as the leader of the “dream team” in Antioch (v. 1), and then again as the leader of the first missionary team (v. 2), with Saul as his first lieutenant. After they were commissioned (v. 3), they began their work in Cyprus, with John Mark as their helper

(vv. 4-5).

At the beginning, it’s “Barnabas and Saul” who witness on Cyprus (Acts 13:7). But by the time they leave, Luke writes “*Now Paul and his companions set sail from Paphos and came to Perga in Pamphilia*” (Acts 13:13). Thereafter it’s “Paul and Barnabas” for the remainder of the trip

(Acts 13:43, 46, 50), with one notable exception. When the missionaries finally returned to Antioch, the natural leadership of Paul was recognized and accepted. Luke also indicates this by using the expression “Paul and Barnabas” as he continues to narrate the subsequent events at Antioch (Acts 15:2, 35).

The fact that Barnabas faithfully continued the mission with Paul as the leader shows that he never yielded to the all too common desire to always be first. Even though Mark had left the party (Acts 13:13), Barnabas had the grace to learn how to play “second fiddle.” He recognized that Paul’s personality, education and gifted teaching superseded his; so he graciously deferred to Paul’s leadership, and continued to remain by Paul’s side.

What Barnabas did for Saul needs to be practiced in our churches today. The Lord never intended anyone to sail his own boat through the uncharted waters of life or ministry – *without assistance*. All of us need help. The greater the task and the more challenging the problem, the more help we need! Encouragement is something everyone *can do*; it’s something everyone *must have*; and it’s something everyone *must receive*.

Today, instead of feeling upbeat, your heart may be downcast. Instead of being confident and hopeful about the future, you may be anxious and fearful. If that’s the case, the message for you is really quite simple: don’t try to manage it alone. The Christian life is a team effort. That’s the way God has designed it.

One of the reasons I’m standing before you today is because of the men that came alongside me and encouraged me during my formative years. I think of Mr. Newell Herd, the Sunday School Superintendent who gave me the opportunity to teach my first class; Hans Josephsen, the young minister who encouraged me to share my testimony in a Sunday evening service; Bruce Baker, the camp director who gave me the opportunity to minister as a junior camp counselor; Dr. Gerald Hawthorne, who encouraged me to pursue the study of New Testament Greek, and Dr. S. Lewis Johnson, who encouraged me to teach and preach the Word of God. Everyone *needs* a Barnabas – and everyone *needs to be* a Barnabas, by His grace and for His glory!