**Bethel Christian Fellowship**

**Fair Lawn, NJ**

**Paul’s Treasured Friendships (2): “Barnabas, Son of Encouragement”**

**Acts 15:1-40; 1 Corinthians 9:6; Galatians 2:1, 9, 13; Colossians 4:10**

**(Part 2)**

**September 3, 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” (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.

As we saw in our previous study, Barnabas was one of the choicest saints of the early church and a great encouragement to the Apostle Paul. His story unfolds in the book of Acts, where Luke presents a series of important “snapshots” of his life. Thus far we have looked at the first five:

* In Acts 4:36-37, he is introduced as an individual with a generous and sacrificial spirit. His original name was Joseph, but when he sold his land and donated the proceeds to help support the poorer members of the Jerusalem church, the apostles gave him the name “Barnabas,” which means “Son of Encouragement.”
* In Acts 9:26-27, he was the one man in the Jerusalem church who believed in the spiritual transformation of Saul. He took him to the apostles and courageously vouched for him, and as a result, they gladly received him into their fellowship.
* In Acts 11:19-26, he was commissioned by the elders in the Jerusalem church to determine if the Gentile church in Antioch was genuine. He quickly saw the grace of God at work in their lives and encouraged them to persevere in their new found faith. He also encouraged Saul by bringing him to Antioch and giving him his great opportunity to minister in this important work.
* In Acts 11: 27-30, he was selected by the church at Antioch, along with Saul, to bring a relief fund for the brethren in Judea who were suffering from a severe famine. Those who sent the gift knew that it was being put into the hands of a responsible and trustworthy representative.
* In Acts 13:1-3, he was the acknowledged leader of the first missionary journey. It was “Barnabas and Saul” who set sail for Cyprus, but by the time they left it was “Paul and his companions” who began the next leg of their journey. The fact that Barnabas continued the mission with Paul as the leader shows that he resisted the common temptation of wanting to be first. Instead, he graciously chose to play “second fiddle” to Paul’s gifted leadership.

Today’s study brings us to the last two snapshots of Barnabas’ exceptional ministry of encouragement. In the first, he joins Paul in opposing a dangerous threat to their Gentile mission (Acts 15:1-6). In the second, he parts company with Paul after a “sharp disagreement” arose between them (15:36-41). This will end their working partnership, but it will not end their friendship. Paul’s esteem for Barnabas is evident by the way he refers to him in his epistles (Cf. 1 Cor. 9:6; Gal. 2:13). As we shall also see, this sad event was *providentially overruled for the good* of missions, and of Paul himself (2 Tim. 4:11).

**A. He Joined Paul in Opposing the Judaizers (Acts 14:26ff).** After their missionary journey, here’s what happened next: “*From Attalia* (on the southern coast of Turkey) *they sailed back to Antioch* (in northern Syria)*, where they had been committed to the grace of God for the work they had now completed. On arriving there, they gathered the church together and reported all that God had done through them and how he had opened the door of faith to the Gentiles. And they stayed there a long time with the disciples. Some men came down from Judea to Antioch and were teaching the brothers: ‘unless you are circumcised, according to the custom taught by Moses, you cannot be saved.’ This brought* ***Paul and Barnabas*** *into sharp dispute and debate with them. So* ***Paul and Barnabas*** *were appointed, along with some other believers, to go up to Jerusalem to see the apostles and elders about this question*” (Acts 14:26-15:2).

A formal meeting was convened to discuss the problem (15:3ff). After a free and open discussion, Peter rehearsed what the Lord had done among the Gentiles in the house of Cornelius (vv. 7-11). Then “**Barnabas and Paul**” (v. 12) reported what the Lord had continued to do through them among the Gentiles. This reversal of the word order has not gone unnoticed by many of the commentators. As one as author has written, “Paul wisely let Barnabas take the lead in Jerusalem; for in Jerusalem, it was the word of Barnabas, rather than Paul, which carried weight. (Acts 15:25-26)” (Hiebert, In Paul’s Shadow).

As a result of the reasoned counsel of Peter, Barnabas, Paul, and James (the half- brother of Jesus), the church concluded that Jews and Gentiles alike can be saved only by faith (alone) in Christ (alone.) Gentiles would not be required to be circumcised. Both Barnabas and Paul were standing firm on this matter – and they were standing together. Then they took the good news to Antioch, and the church rejoiced and was encouraged. But a problem would soon arise.

**B. He Parts Company with Paul and Works in His Own Field of Ministry (Acts 15:36-41);**

“*Some time later Paul said to Barnabas, ‘Let us go back and visit the brothers in all the towns where we preached the word of the Lord and see how they are doing.’ Barnabas wanted to take John, also called Mark, with them, but Paul did not think it wise to take him, because he had deserted them in Pamphylia and had not continued with them in the work. They had such a sharp disagreement that they parted company. Barnabas took Mark and sailed for Cyprus, but Paul chose Silas and left, commended by the brothers to the grace of the Lord. He went through Syria and Cilicia, strengthening the churches*.”

After spending some needed rest and recovery time in Antioch, Paul and Barnabas both agreed on the importance of a second missionary trip. But they could not agree on who should be on the missionary team. The fact that Barnabas wanted to take along John Mark should not be all that surprising. He and Mark were cousins (Col. 4:10), and blood is often thicker than water.

But more important, Barnabas was the kind of person who eagerly tried to help others (as we have seen), and who possessed a gift of insight concerning the spiritual potential of others (as we have also seen). True to his gracious and generous nature, he believed that Mark should not be thrown aside without giving him another opportunity.

But Paul was just as convinced that they should *not* take Mark. After all, Mark had deserted the team at the beginning of the first missionary journey (Acts 13:13), which was a sign of true weakness. According to Paul, the mission was too important and too demanding to enlist someone who had already proven himself to be unreliable. (By way of analogy, would you really loan money to a person who didn’t pay off the first amount he borrowed from you?)

The problem was that each man had an element of the truth on his side, and neither man was willing to compromise his convictions. As the discussion continued, it turned into a “sharp disagreement,” and it seemed that the only solution was for these two longtime friends to divide the territory and separate. Barnabas took Mark and sailed to his native Cyprus, and Paul took Silas and went back through Syria and Cilicia, strengthening the newly formed churches.

Thus ended the profitable and beautiful working partnership of Paul and Barnabas. There is no Scriptural evidence that they ever worked together again. But not all separations lead to bad endings, as was the case here. This sad event was *providentially overruled* for good – in two significant ways. *First*, God multiplied by dividing. There were now two missionary teams instead of one, both armed with the gospel message. Only a God who is sovereign can take something so seemingly sad and transform it into a powerful force for good (Rom. 8:28).

*Second*, and just as important, we know that John Mark ultimately *did* succeed in the ministry and that Paul *did* come to love and appreciate him. To the Colossians, Paul will later write; “*My fellow prisoner Aristarchus sends you his greetings, as does Mark, the cousin of Barnabas. (You have received instructions about him; if he comes to you, welcome him)*” (Col. 4:10). Paul also identifies Mark as one of his “fellow workers” at the end of his letter to Philemon (vv. 23-24). Finally, in the last days of his life, Paul says to Timothy; “*Get Mark and bring him with you, because he is helpful to me in my ministry*” (2 Tim. 4:11).

Is this the same Mark that had abandoned Paul during the first missionary journey? Yes, it is the same Mark; but no, he is an altogether different man. So how had Mark been restored to such a place of prominence and importance in Paul’s ministry? The New Testament does not tell us; but it’s no coincidence that Mark remained with Barnabas following the break-up with Paul. The “Son of Encouragement” surely had a hand in Mark’s recovery, which led to Paul’s renewed love and appreciation for Mark. No wonder that Paul never had a bad thing to say about Barnabas. Although their partnership ended, their friendship never did. (Cf. 1 Cor. 9:6; Gal. 2:13).

Encouragement *is* something everyone can do; and encouragement *is* something that everyone must have. If that was true for Paul, how much more so is it true for us? Everyone needs to know that someone cares. So, what are we waiting for? Let’s look for someone to encourage today!