

## Barnabas - The Encourager

### May there be more

Barnabas' name was Joseph, but was changed to 'son of encouragement'. He must have been the sort of person who left a trail of encouraged people behind him wherever he went. The various episodes in the New Testament where he appears from time to time bear this out. (By the way, if your friends gave you a nickname, would you be likely to get one like Encourager?). Whenever he arrived he certainly 'barnabized' many (Acts 11:23).

The Greek word "parakaleo" has several related meanings: *to exhort, admonish, teach, beg, entreat, beseech, console, encourage, comfort*. But the basic word is always used for one primary purpose – to describe functions that will help Christians to be built up in Christ, or to help them to build up one another in Christ. Evaluate your personal attitude in view of this New Testament exhortation. Like Jesus, you must always be gentle with the 'wounded', and – only if you have earned the right – occasionally be tough with the lazy or those whose potential may be realised more by rebuke than a soft word. Helpful criticism (observation) should always – or nearly always – leave the person feeling that he/she has been helped. I heard someone once say: 'If you treat people as they are they will stay as they are. But if you treat them as they ought to be they will become bigger and better persons.'

There's a story that goes like this: God decided to reduce the weapons in the devil's armoury to one. So Satan could choose which 'fiery dart' he could keep. He quickly chose the *power of discouragement*. The devil reasoned, 'If only I can persuade Christians to be thoroughly discouraged, they will make no further effort and I shall have a stronghold in their lives.'

An old saint once wrote: *"If he earns your praise, bestow it; If you like him, let him know it. Let words of true encouragement be said. Do not wait till life is over, and he's underneath the clover. For he cannot read his tomb-stone when he's dead!"* I've seen a desk calendar that reads *"People may ask you for criticism, but they only want praise."* We can depend so much on 'positive feedback' that such **praise** becomes addictive: we cannot function without it.

If you truly appreciated someone, you should give yourself permission to tell them! People are healed by encouragement; they grow to like themselves in a healthy way if they're encouraged; they reduce their 'self-despising' attitude through encouragement. May Barnabas' tribe increase in our churches: God knows we desperately need more church members like him.

When Barnabas is introduced to us in the book of Acts, we see him selling some land to help provide for fellow Christian believers who were in severe economic need (Acts 4:36-37). We are given scant information about Barnabas' background. We're told that he was a Levite from the island of Cyprus (verse 37). We are not told, however, whether the land he sold was in Judea or in Cyprus. He was either a cousin or an uncle to Mark the evangelist and Gospel writer (Colossians 4:10) and would later be a great mentor to him. Being "full of the Holy Spirit" (Acts 11:24), Barnabas seemed to excel at encouragement and exhortation. The early history of the first-century Church was one of powerful personal examples, bringing many to truly live God's way of life. But it was also a time of persecutions, struggles and difficulties. We read an interesting account in the later portion of Acts 9 that sheds more light on Barnabas' encouraging nature.

When Paul, formerly called Saul, tried to reconcile with the Jerusalem church after having persecuted many of its members before he became a Christian, Barnabas was at his side (Acts 9:26-30). Many in Jerusalem were concerned to once again see Paul, remembering his former deeds. Many may have faced his wrath or had family and friends who had suffered from his prior actions, but Barnabas spoke to the apostles and verified Paul's story of his conversion. Barnabas also supported Paul by explaining how strongly he had preached in Damascus. Eventually, Paul was accepted within the Church (albeit perhaps with some caution). But would he have been accepted in Antioch and Jerusalem had he not been "vouched for" by someone with such a solid reputation as Barnabas? And if not would the Epistles have been written?

By the time of Acts 11:22-24 we find Barnabas still active in the Jerusalem congregation and trusted by the leadership to go to Antioch to begin working with (giving encouragement and direction to) people who were responding to God's Word. Here again, we see Barnabas living up to his name of Encourager. He understood what God was doing in bringing gentiles (non-Jews) into the Church and probably spent the rest of his life serving God to this end. Many times in his preaching Barnabas faced hostile Jews or gentiles who were not happy with the message he proclaimed—as it flew in the face of the false concepts and practices they advocated and led increasing numbers away from them. How hard it must have been to remain encouraging in the midst of such intense opposition!

Barnabas mentored Paul as he began working alongside the other teachers in Antioch. Subsequently, Barnabas took Paul and a young disciple, John Mark (the aforementioned Mark who later became author of the Gospel bearing his name), on a trip through Asia Minor. By this time Barnabas and Paul are both referred to as apostles (Acts 14:14). Although we are not told of the particulars of Barnabas' ordination, he must have exhibited the fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22-23) along with the humility needed to be ordained to such an office.

After some time had passed, Paul proposed that he and Barnabas retrace the steps of their original journey and strengthen the churches that had been established (Acts 15:36). Sadly, a serious disagreement came between Barnabas and Paul over whether young John Mark would accompany them on this trip. Paul was so upset with John Mark returning home in the middle of their first journey that he didn't want him to come on this trip. Barnabas insisted that they should take Mark. With this matter standing between them, they went separate ways (Acts 15:39-41). However, this disagreement was not permanent, as Paul and Barnabas later worked together in building and serving the church in Corinth (see 1 Corinthians 9:6).

We have no record of Barnabas being angry with Paul, and he continued to encourage (teach) young John Mark in his ministry. Later still, Paul implicitly acknowledged that Barnabas had been right not to give up on John Mark because he had become a good minister—he was "useful" to Paul for ministry (2 Timothy 4:11).

God used Barnabas in a very influential way in the development of the early Church. His nickname of Encourager flowed from living God's way of life. How many people came to the knowledge of God's way of life, not only through Barnabas' preaching, but also (and maybe even more importantly) through his example and encouragement? This should be a lesson for each of us.

Was Barnabas a perfect man? No, of course he wasn't. But God records the histories of men such as Barnabas to show us what great things He can do through men and women who strive to overcome their human nature and yield to Him. Although we are not told of what ultimately happened to Barnabas, I can't help but think that he continued to grow in God's way, encouraging others until the end of his life.

Barnabas lived up to the good name others gave him, and his example is one that all of us would do well to follow. A famous American pastor once wrote, *"Flatter me, and I may not believe you. Criticise me, and I may not like you. Ignore me, and I may not forgive you. Encourage me, and I may never forget you."*