

Barnabas: Son Of Encouragement And Consolation

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Everyone can use a little encouragement on a regular basis. Very often it does not take much more than a kind word of concern or a simple statement of appreciation to boost our feeling of accomplishment to exuberant levels. Research has found that people are much happier on the job if they feel appreciated for their work. This factor is more important in day-to-day job satisfaction than the amount of one's salary. On the other hand, a well-deserved raise in pay is like your boss saying, "I appreciate your work!"

As society puts more distractions before us, encouraging others is becoming a lost art. Today, we just get too busy to be concerned about the welfare of our fellow human beings, and busyness becomes an excuse for neglecting them. As Christians, we must find the time to be concerned about others—about their welfare, about their happiness, about their spiritual growth! We are our brother's keeper (Genesis 4:9; I Corinthians 8:11-13). Encouragement goes a long way to boosting the spirits of a discouraged friend who must persevere through a trial.

To the other apostles in the early church, Barnabas excelled in encouraging others. What was it about him that he was recognized by the title "Son of Encouragement" or "Son of Consolation" (Acts 4:36, margin)? His character and example provide helpful references as we seek to grow in this area.

We find details about Barnabas' background spread throughout the book of Acts and Paul's epistles. Luke tells us that Barnabas was a Levite whose family came from the island of Cyprus where some of the Jews of the Diaspora had settled. He was a cousin of Mark, the writer of the gospel by that name (Colossians 4:10). His Hebrew name was Joseph (or Joses), but he was better known as Barnabas. Joseph means "may God increase"; Joses, "He that pardons"; and Barnabas, "son of encouragement." All three names contain wonderful attributes of God. Since the apostles called him "son of encouragement," this may have been Barnabas' most important characteristic.

Barnabas' Service

Barnabas is first mentioned as a landowner who sold some land and generously donated all the proceeds to the apostles in Jerusalem (Acts 4:36-37). A few years later, God appointed him as an apostle with Paul to the Gentiles (Acts 13:2-3; 14:14). He spent many years preaching the gospel in lands far distant from both Jerusalem and Cyprus.

Tradition says that Barnabas was one of the seventy whom Jesus Christ sent out in pairs "as lambs among wolves" into every city (Luke 10:1-12). They were to carry no money, baggage, or sandals, nor were they to greet anyone along the road. Jesus told them that they were on a special mission of peace only to those God was calling. He sent them to preach the gospel to those whom He defined specifically as "son[s] of peace"—the called of God.

"The seventy returned with joy" (verses 17-20). They had been greatly encouraged by the power and purpose of their mission. Jesus clarified that their joy should not be in their authority over demons

"but rather rejoice because your names are written in heaven." He gave them an eternal source of encouragement instead of allowing them to settle for the consolation of having limited authority over evil spirits.

Barnabas was not afraid to stand by God's messengers in a time of tumult. He was the first person of influence and responsibility to extend his personal warmth and home to Saul of Tarsus, when all Jerusalem was still casting stones at him (Acts 9:26-31). The disciples in Jerusalem, who knew Saul only as a fierce persecutor and murderer of the saints, were afraid of him. They could hardly believe that the feared inquisitor had been converted. Although the rest shrank from Saul in fear and suspicion, Barnabas came forward and showed great kindness toward him.

He introduced Saul to the apostles (verse 27), so that he could tell them the story of his miraculous conversion and how he had preached with power at Damascus. In subsequent times, as Paul came into greater prominence, Barnabas quietly fell back into a supporting role.

Barnabas and Paul had their moments of disagreement, however. A serious conflict arose between them over John Mark, Barnabas' cousin. In Acts 15:36-41, Paul was still upset over Mark's decision in Pamphylia to leave them and their work, and this led to a definite breach between them. Sharp contention caused Barnabas and Paul to head their separate ways—Barnabas with Mark to Cyprus and Paul with Silas to Syria and Cilicia. This breach between them apparently lasted for quite some time.

In Antioch, Paul considered certain converted Jews, including the apostle Peter, to be hypocrites regarding eating with the Gentiles (Galatians 2:11-13). In verse 13, Paul writes, "Even Barnabas was carried away with their hypocrisy." The wording indicates that Barnabas' actions surprised Paul. Obviously, this was uncharacteristic of Barnabas, and it miffed Paul. It does seem odd that Barnabas would not fear harboring Saul of Tarsus in his home, protecting him from vigilantes, but was afraid to stand up to Jewish Christians regarding eating with Gentile Christians. This just shows that all Christians occasionally give in to the prejudices of our backgrounds, and we spend much of our lives trying to overcome them.

Although Barnabas and Paul had their differences, they were not irreconcilable. Paul last refers to Barnabas a few years later regarding the church's support of them (I Corinthians 9:6). By this time, it seems Paul and Barnabas had reconciled and were working together again. We would expect nothing less from two converted individuals.

Scripture paints a picture of Barnabas as a kind, forgiving, encouraging and compassionate man. Luke sums up his character in Acts 11:24, "He was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and of faith." Luke then follows this ringing endorsement with a meaningful postscript: Wherever he went, "a great many people were added to the Lord." Despite Barnabas' faults, no more or less than any of ours, he received a wonderful, God-inspired commendation as a permanent example of a true witness for God. How encouraging for us!

Barnabas sacrificed himself to be instrumental in God's cultivation of His church. Paul makes specific mention of the fact that Barnabas, who willingly impoverished himself in the interests of the church, labored with his own hands to support himself on his missionary journeys.

Encouragement

In Acts 4:36 Luke translates *Barnabas* to mean "son of encouragement" or "son of consolation." The original Greek word rendered "encouragement," *paraklesis*, means encouragement, consolation, comfort, exhortation and entreaty. It may be that the apostles who gave Joseph the name Barnabas, saw all of these qualities in his character.

What was it that Barnabas did so well? Paul writes that it is a minister's responsibility to be encouraging to God's church. Ministers are sent "to establish and encourage [us] concerning our faith" (I Thessalonians 3:2-3). Barnabas wisely encouraged people by pointing them in the right direction—toward the coming Kingdom of God. All the members in Antioch he "encouraged . . . that with a purpose of heart they should continue with the Lord" (Acts 11:23).

In its basic meaning, encouragement is the act of giving hope or promise. The council in Jerusalem wrote a letter to the Gentile brethren in Antioch, Syria, and Cilicia regarding things they should observe and not requiring them to keep Jewish law, particularly circumcision, a practice that troubled the Gentiles (Acts 15:22-29). The Jewish brethren in Jerusalem told them that they wanted "to lay no greater burden than these necessary things: that you should abstain from things offered to idols, from the blood, from things strangled, and from sexual immorality" (verse 29).

Acts 15:30-31 continues, "When [the brethren in Antioch] had read it, they rejoiced over its encouragement [*paraklesis*]." The letter gave them hope that, as Gentiles, they could reach the goal set before them to overcome their sins and receive the gift of salvation without going through Judaism first. Mercy is better than sacrifice (Hosea 6:6).

Worldly Consolation

It is possible to receive consolation from material things, but the effect is only temporary. This happens when someone takes a depressed friend out to a restaurant or buys him or her flowers. Does the depressed person feel better? Yes—temporarily. The same can be said for a game show contestant who receives a consolation prize after losing.

Jesus says in Luke 6:24, "But woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation [*paraklesis*]." The consolation of the rich is the temporary pleasure they get from acquiring material wealth. This is the only consolation they receive, and it is temporary in every way. How far short of the real prize, eternal life, have they come? There is no comparison. In the Parable of the Rich Fool, Jesus teaches:

"And I [the rich man] will say to my soul, 'Soul, you have many goods laid up for many years; take your ease; eat, drink, and be merry.'" But God said to him, "You fool! This night your soul will be required of you; then whose will those things be which you have provided?" So is he who lays up treasure for himself, and is not rich toward God. (Luke 12:19-21)

Certain friends of a terminally sick Christian man visited him in the hospital and tried to encourage him by recalling his great accomplishments and usefulness. To this he retorted, "You are all miserable comforters! Many have visited and tried to comfort me by telling me what I have done. Christ is my source of consolation, not anything I have done!"

Consolation Through Christ

The sick man was right: Jesus Christ is our true consolation!

For as the sufferings of Christ abound in us, so our consolation [*paraklesis*] also abounds through Christ. Now if we [apostles] are afflicted, it is for your consolation [*paraklesis*] and salvation, which is effective for enduring the same sufferings which we also suffer. Or if we are comforted [*parakleo*], it is for your consolation [*paraklesis*] and salvation. And our hope for you is steadfast, because we know that as you are partakers of the sufferings, so also you will partake of the consolation [*paraklesis*]. (II Corinthians 1:5-7)

Paul realizes that to share Christ's sufferings always involves sharing God's consolation or comfort through that suffering. His hope is that the Corinthians would triumph in their time of trial, and they could do this by having the right perspective of it.

Whenever Christ's sufferings are multiplied in us, so also is His comfort. The greater the suffering, the greater the comfort from Christ, and the greater the ability to share suffering and consolation with others in the church. Paul writes,

Now may our Lord Jesus Christ Himself, and our God and Father, who has loved us and given us everlasting consolation [*paraklesis*] and good hope by grace, comfort [*parakleo*] your hearts and establish you in every good word and work. (II Thessalonians 2:16-17)

Where can we look for this consolation from Jesus Christ? Paul admonishes us in Romans 15:4, "For whatever things were written before were written for our learning, that we through the patience and comfort [*paraklesis*] of the Scriptures might have hope." God promises that if we study His written Word, He will give us hope, along with patience and encouragement.

What is hope? In its basic form hope is the expectation that our desires will be fulfilled. Paul puts part of our hope into words in I Thessalonians 2:19, "For what is our hope, or joy, or crown of rejoicing? Is it not even you in the presence of our Lord Jesus Christ at His coming?"

What an encouraging example Barnabas left for us! He was a good man who was full of the Holy Spirit and faith. His kindness, generosity and forgiving nature helped console and encourage many. He encouraged the brethren with the hope that they would be raised incorruptible at Christ's return and consoled them with the knowledge that "as the sufferings of Christ abound in us, so our consolation also abounds through Christ" (II Corinthians 1:5). We too can be of great help and comfort to each other if we take the time to be like Barnabas, sons and daughters of encouragement.