
Acts 11:19-30

“Now those who were scattered because of the persecution that arose over Stephen traveled as far as Phoenicia and Cyprus and Antioch, speaking the word of God to no one except Jews, but there were some of them, men of Cyprus and Cyrene, who on coming to Antioch spoke to the Hellenists also, preaching the Lord Jesus, and the hand of the Lord was with him, and a great number who believed turned to the Lord.

“The report of this came to the ears of the church in Jerusalem and then sent Barnabas to Antioch. When 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, for he was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and of faith. A great many people were added to the Lord, so Barnabas went to Tarsus to look for Saul, and 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.

“Now, in these days prophets came down from Jerusalem to Antioch, and one of them named Agabus stood up and foretold by the Spirit that there would be a great famine over all the world. This took place in the days of Claudius. The disciples determined everyone, according to his ability, to send relief to the brothers living in Judea, and they did so, sending it to the elders by the hand of Barnabas and Saul.”

Barnabas: Five Characteristics of the Encourager

Our title today is Barnabas, but I'd like to give you a subtitle as well, Five Characteristics of the Encourager, the Encourager. Barnabas. His name means, “Son of Encouragement.” He's a great example to us biblically of what an encourager is, who he is and what he does.

I recently was viewing again a TED Talk. Some of you have heard of TED Talks, a little resource online of video clips of instruction and inspiration. One of the more famous ones, some of you may have seen it, is about leadership. It shows a scene as a teacher is talking over this scene and instructing. It shows a scene of a hillside with a bunch of people sitting around. Then all of a sudden one guy comes out on the hillside and he throws his hands up and he starts just

dancing. He's the only guy dancing. For a while that goes on until a second person comes out and joins him and starts dancing with him.

Now, please, don't critique my dancing. I'm actually much better than what you perceive in this moment. That was just a total lie, by the way.

Before long, over the next few minutes, the hillside began to empty out and everyone is dancing. The instructor in this little three-minute video makes the point that often when creating a movement, the second guy, the first follower, determines the success or failure; that in some ways the most powerful position is number two.

Now, that's an interesting observation, just the crucial nature of that one person that comes and turns that lone nut dancing on a hillside into the leader of a movement. When you stop and consider that many of you may not be called to be number one. You may not be called to be that lone nut to go out and start something, but you are in many ways every single day number two. You are the number two person in many, many lives. You are really the number two person in the lives of your children, the lives of your spouse, the lives of your parents, the lives of your siblings, friends, work associates, people that work for you, people you work for.

Many times you're in that critical position where God is doing something and you're the first one to come along and say, "Wow, look at what God is doing. This is incredible. I see God at work in your life." It's the power of being in that position to encourage.

Now, in some ways what I've shared to this point is just a natural observation, but what I want to bring to you today is more than a technique. It's more than a gimmick. It's more than just positive thinking, because in God when we know the person of Jesus Christ, we are connected to God and to God's resources and to God's goodness and to God's wisdom, and we really do have every reason to be full of faith for what God is doing. Encouraging others is simply the act of relating to people according to the abundance of God.

Let me say that again. Encouraging others is simply the act of relating to people according to the abundance of God. When that gets in us and we relate to people consistent with who God is, with the knowledge that God is at work and God is acting and God is good and God is wise, great things begin to happen.

Just consider this moment in history. Consider what's happening. The gospel, the message of who Jesus is, is about to go out into the world. The commission that Jesus gave, "Take this message to the end of the earth," it's about to happen. There's an explosion.

Paul, the apostle to the nations, is about to start going and planting churches, and the rest of the Book of Acts tells us that story of church after church after church, which is planted, and then books that are written, letters back to those churches so that the gospel expands. The church begins to fill the earth, and we are given the record of that in scripture, the holy scripture, which now is a foundation for us and the record of that message so that the church is even being built 2,000 years later, a critical point.

Here's what we've read up until this point. The gospel in Jerusalem, Jews are being saved. It's pretty much a Jewish church, and then that Jewish church gets stretched. Even Samaritans get saved. Then the unthinkable happens. A gentile gets saved, his whole family. Imagine that. People eat pig and they get saved. Amazing how God is bringing down these barriers of separation. Cornelius and his whole house gets saved.

We don't yet have a gentile church, but we have here in Antioch a group of Jewish believers who are scattered because of the persecution that arose over Stephen, and they come to Antioch and they begin just sharing this message of who Jesus is, and Jews are getting saved, Jewish Christians now starting the church.

Then a couple of guys show up and they begin to tell gentiles about Christ and gentiles start getting saved, and then they start getting saved in large number. The next thing you know you've got Jews and gentiles in the same church. Then the unthinkable happens. You have more gentiles than Jews, and this hybrid then grows into what is really a gentile church.

Now, Paul gets connected to that church. He comes and he begins to preach and teach. He's there for a year. He sees with his own eyes this church. You have to believe that it had an impact on him and what he was about to become and what he was about to do, and Antioch becomes his home base, the place where he's sent from to start all of these gentile churches.

This is a critical point, a tipping point, where it's all about to happen, and it could go either way in the natural. What does God do? He sends Barnabas.

Jerusalem sends Barnabas, the son of encouragement, in order to further the purposes of God, in order to draw attention to what God is doing, to protect in a sense what God is doing so that they'll just get pushed right off that cliff into the will of God.

As we get ready to launch into these characteristics, five characteristics of the encourager, let me just draw attention to Barnabas for a moment. We're told in Acts Chapter 4 that Barnabas sold his property. He sold what he had so that it could be distributed to those who are in need. We're told that his actual name is not Barnabas. It's Joseph, but the apostle begin to call him Barnabas, which means "Son of Encouragement," because this attribute was so pronounced in his life that he was just by nature someone who encouraged others in the purposes of God.

I don't want to pretend for a moment that Barnabas was without fault, but I do believe that there was a work of God's grace in his life that models something for us that's an example for us.

The encourager; number one, the encourager sees God at work. He sees God at work. He identifies God's work or God's grace. Look at Verse 23. "When Barnabas came and saw the grace of God ..." This is an important statement, because Barnabas shows up and what he observes is, "Wow, God is at work in this place."

Consider for a moment that Barnabas was a good Jewish boy. He was a Levite, and Antioch was a different place from Jerusalem. Five hundred thousand people, a very, very large city. In fact, Antioch was the third largest city in the whole Roman Empire. Of course, Rome would have been first, Alexandria, second. The third largest city in the entire Roman Empire at the time was Antioch. Very big, very cosmopolitan. People of all races gathered in what is today modern-day Turkey, so quite a bit north of Jerusalem.

In Syria there is this city on the Orontes, Antioch. Benjamin goes, and it must have been startling for him to contrast between what he knew and experienced in Jewish society in Jerusalem and what he experienced at Antioch. This large metropolitan place that was very, very pagan.

Many gods were worshiped in Antioch, but there was one in particular, Daphne. There was a temple built to Daphne, and Daphne, according to the legend, was a mortal, was a maid, and Apollo fell in love with Daphne, and in order to save

her from her immortality, he turned her into a laurel bush. Outside of the city there was a temple built to Daphne, and on the hillsides all around the temple were laurel gardens, where acts of immorality took place between temple prostitutes and so-called worshippers recreating the love of Apollo and Daphne.

It was a very immoral place. There were sayings in the day that would talk about the morals of Daphne, and it referred to very loose and lustful living. Here Barnabas shows up in this huge place, swamped with people, very immoral, and what does he see? He sees God. It's amazing really when you think about it.

I was driving the other day with my daughter. She was home on spring break. We were in a parking lot. I was in a little bit of a hurry, and I went to go and I realized someone was coming, and I stopped. I was about two feet out of the lane. This dear, dear lady, all she has to do is adjust her path two feet, go around me. Instead, she drives right up to me and lays on the horn. She's seven feet away from me, a couple of windows separating us, my daughter here.

I'm not proud to tell you, but I was like, "What? Go around." I just gave her a little gesture. Well, she had a gesture for me. I'm like, "Are you for real? That's what you want to say to me because I'm two feet out here in the way?" My daughter begins to stroke my shoulder. She said, "It's okay, daddy. It's all right." Now I want to follow her. I want to pull up beside her and say, "Really? Really? Because I'm two ..."

One of the things I've noticed about my sin is I can be very patient if it's my idea, but when someone else gets indignant at me and I don't deserve it, I get really indignant. At least I think I don't deserve it.

God, are you even in this place? My roots are South Georgia, so I remember going to my grandfather's funeral in South Georgia, and as the funeral procession went down the street, people on the street stopped, took their hats off out of respect for those who had passed. That's a big difference from laying on the horn and ... You know what? God's not just in South Georgia. He's in South Florida.

It's easy to say, "Where I come from, people say, 'Merry Christmas.'" "Where I come from, people greet you and they thank you." "Where I come from, we eat

this.” “Where I come from, they dress like this.” “Where I come from ...” “Where I come from ...” “Where I come from ...”

Well, Barnabas just could have talked all day long about “Where I come from,” and he would in many ways have been correct to say, “I think the culture is a little less unholy in Jerusalem,” but what he saw was God at work. He saw God at work, and the result was he furthered the work of God rather than calling attention all the time to what wasn’t right.

The first thing he did was he saw it. Second, he rejoiced in it. He rejoiced in it. Verse 23, again, “When he saw the grace of God ...” Listen to this. This is revolutionary. “... He was glad.” He was happy. This is radical for some of us. Some of us aren’t happy if things are going well. If we don’t have something to be afraid of or something to be worried about or something to complain about, then the world is not as it should be.

We somehow in a strange way feel needed if something is going wrong, or maybe if everything is going right, we’re worried that something is going to go wrong. If not, we’re worried because we just worry too much and we’re worried because we think something will go wrong. Now I’m talking really about myself as much as anyone else. I think many of us can relate to it. Sometimes we’re just afraid to be happy.

We see God, we see someone do something and this is what happens. “I don’t want to call attention to it, because then they’ll quit.” “If I tell this loved one that he’s doing good, he’ll stop trying.” That is not a biblical perspective. The biblical perspective is we rejoice in it.

We’re told here something about Barnabas that explains his perspective. It’s in Verse 24, “... For he was a good man.” “... For he was a good man.” He rejoiced in the work of God because God had done a work of grace in his own heart, and he was happy about the things of God, and he rejoiced in them. He spoke about them. He called attention to them, and he was just glad.

If you could look at me for just a moment. Many times a movement fails or a family derails or an individual fails to fulfill their purpose and destiny because the critical people in those settings just say nothing, because they don’t encourage. They don’t call attention to, “Hey, you’re going to make it. Look at what God is doing. This is good. This is right. This is God at work.” How much of a difference sometimes the person who comes along and just says to a son

or a daughter, “You will make it. I see God in you.” Many times all we have to do to help people fail is just be silent.

Hebrews 3, Verse 13, “But exhort one another every day. Encourage one another every day as long as it is called today, that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin.” What happens is in the absence of exhortation, the absence of encouragement, listen: “Hey, come on, let’s do this. Let’s be faithful. Come on. Don’t faint. You’re going to make it. Persevere. God has a purpose in this. I see God at work in your life.”

In the absence of that, what happens is the one critical word, though it may come infrequently, it sounds so loud, because it’s coming in the midst of a void of positive, substantive input, and our hearts lose hope. They become hard, and then sin and its deceitfulness begins to reach out and say, “Hey, I’ve got something better for you.” He sees it. He rejoices in it.

Number three, and I think here we get to the substance of why we’re not just talking about positive thinking. Number three, the encourager motivates by calling people to the abundance of God. He motivates by calling people to the abundance of God. In Verse 23, “When he came, he saw the grace of God. He was glad and he exhorted them, he encouraged them all to remain faithful to the Lord.” He’s saying, “You remain faithful to the Lord. You can count on the Lord. You can count on his word. God will not fail. You don’t need to waver or faint or give up or fall back.”

The word “exhort” brings together two Greek words, *parakaleó*, and it means to go alongside of and to call to; to go alongside of and to call to. The idea is you come up beside this person and you’re calling out to them, but you’re not just calling their name. You’re calling them to God. You’re calling them to the purposes of God. You’re calling them to trust in God and to be a part of what God is doing.

That is exactly what Barnabas does. He shows up. He sees God’s grace. He calls attention to it. He’s happy about it, and then he begins to tell the people, “Hey, God is at work here. You’re the real thing. You’re the genuine article. Don’t faint. Be faithful. Be faithful to the Lord,” and he calls them to a place of faithfulness.

Again, in Verse 24, we’re given an indication of what was in Barnabas that helped him to do that. “He was a man who was full of faith.” Verse 24, “He was

a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and of faith.” In fact, you could take these two characteristics, full of faith, full of the Holy Spirit, see them in some regards as parallel, that Barnabas just had faith that God had a purpose, that God was at work and that God’s purposes would not fail. He believed in the abundance of God. He believed in the goodness of God, and he had eyes of faith to call attention to it.

Friends, it doesn’t take faith to see what God is not doing. It takes faith to perceive God is at work. There is a work of grace here, and there’s a temptation based on our past experience to look at our lives and say, “I’m not going to change.” “They’re not going to change.” “I look at my track record.” In order to overcome that sense of hopelessness, we have to get our eyes on the abundance of God, that God’s word is true and he fulfills his word and his promises are true.

Now, when we read this passage, we’re just reading about the supernatural. There’s a prophet. He shows up from Jerusalem. His name is Agabus, and he prophesizes about a famine. When you get into the next chapter, James is killed. He becomes a martyr, and Peter is in prison. It looks like Peter is about to be killed. Then there’s this incredible release, and the angel shows up. Peter is being guarded by 16 soldiers. Peter is freed. He shows up at the prayer meeting where they’re praying for him. He knocks on the door. A servant girl named Rhoda comes to the door, and she doesn’t believe it’s Peter. Then she realizes it is Peter. Then she goes back and she tells everyone. They say, “No, it’s not Peter. It’s his ghost.”

I don’t know what in the world that means, but I know this. There was a supernatural perspective of God working miraculously by his spirit, and Barnabas is described as a man full of the Holy Spirit. He’s a man who understood that the Holy Spirit manifests the presence of God.

Now, we make one of two mistakes when we read these passages in Acts 1. One mistake we make is we become overly fascinated with the supernatural and the works of the Holy Spirit. We begin to see the experience and the signs and the wonders as the goal, and that inevitably leads to immaturity and a lack of health spiritually. Jesus warned against seeking after signs, seeking these things in and of themselves.

When you look at a church like Corinth, where we have first and second Corinthians, there was tremendous immaturity in the church because of their,

for one reason, their fascination with spiritual gifts and the supernatural. Paul comes in. He says, "I don't want to do away with that, but listen. You got to get your eyes on Christ," and there was immaturity. They were divided. They were following people. There was immorality. There was a lack of character and strength because of that unhealthy fascination.

The other mistake we make is we deny the supernatural all together. Some people read these texts and say, "Those things didn't even happen." It's difficult to come to that conclusion. There were so many that followed Christ, gave witness to his resurrection. Many of them died as martyrs. It's hard to believe that they died for a lie.

We've already seen here in the Book of Acts that when the testimony of Christ's resurrection is given, statements like this, "We ate and drank with him." It wasn't just an illusion. It wasn't just a vision. There was a physical element to their experience that they were testifying to, but more than likely, many ... Many individuals even hearing this message believe that it did happen but practically deny the supernatural.

We live in a very rational world, a world that says we have to find a natural cause for everything, and if we're not careful, our faith just kind of drains out the bottom and we believe God can do anything, as long as it's natural, but God can't do the supernatural, which if you stop and think about it, is just crazy.

One of the reasons Barnabas came in in such an effective way was he was a man who was full of faith and full of the Holy Spirit so that we need to have categories where we pray for God to supply and provide and move and we believe in him. We believe God to do great things in the lives of people around us. We motivate people by calling them to the abundance of God. "God can do this. God is doing this. I see God at work in your life. God will not fail. God never, never, never goes back on his word. You will not be the first person in the billions of people that have ever lived that God fails to keep his word to. God will keep his word."

Number four, "So motivates by calling people to the abundance of God."
Number four, "Motivates by calling people to the glory of God's purpose, the glory of God's purpose." In Verse 23, "He came. He saw the grace of God. He was glad. He exhorted them to remain faithful to the Lord with steadfast purpose;" with steadfast purpose.

The word for steadfast here is the root word, “cardia.” We get our word “cardiac” from this Greek word. Speaks of wholehearted devotion, wholehearted purpose. That is what Barnabas is after. He’s encouraging them to wholehearted purpose where we’re saying, “I am giving myself wholeheartedly to the purposes of God.”

This is important for us to get a vision for the glory of God’s purpose in our day, in this location, in this church, in this city, in this region in the world. You think about Antioch, 500,000 people, a place of immorality, very diverse, cosmopolitan. Christians are first called “Christians” at Antioch. It is here where they are seen not as just a group of Jewish people, not as just a group following according to this region, but a diverse group of people who are identified by their love for Jesus Christ. They’ve been changed by Christ, and now they’re really taking their full identity as followers of Jesus Christ.

Now, just think about this for a minute. I want to just take two or three minutes right here on this point before we move on to our last point, to talk about the glory of God’s purposes. Imagine, go with me for a minute back to Stephen’s martyrdom. We go eight years back in time to where this wonderful young man, one of the vibrant few men that are chosen as the first deacons in Acts Chapter 6, heart for the poor, bold, full of the spirit of God.

There you are in the court of heaven and you look down and you see Stephen’s about to be killed. You’re like, “Oh, God, God, God, help. Don’t let this happen.” God says, “No, no, wait. Let me show you what my purposes are. I have commissioned my church to go to the end of the earth, and I’m going to bring a persecution on the church, and I’m going to scatter my church like ants in an anthill that’s been kicked, and everywhere they go they’re going to spread the gospel. You see that man’s who’s leading the persecution, Saul? I’m going to save him. I’m going to save him, and Saul will be called “Paul,” by his Roman name, and he will plant churches all over the gentile world.

“I need someone to get that started, and so this precious son, Stephen, this pure light, is going to die and he’s going to look up and he’s going to see my son in heaven. He’s going to give this bold testimony, and Saul’s going to be standing there looking at him, and I’m going to prick his heart. Then on the road to Damascus, I’m going to knock him down. I’m going to fill him with my spirit, and he’s going to go to the nations. But before he does, as I scatter people, I’m going to send a couple of Jewish believers up to Antioch and they’re going to start seeing Jews saved.

“Then others are going to come. They’re going to start preaching to the gentiles. Next thing you know there’s going to be this hybrid church of Jews and gentiles, and then the gentiles will overtake the Jews, and then they’ll be the first gentile church. Then I’m going to send Barnabas, the son of encouragement, and he’s going to go up and he’s going to find Paul and he’s going to bring him down, and they’re going to minister there for a year, and Paul will see this model and he’ll be prepared further, and then he will go to the nations for the church to be built.”

You see the wisdom and the glory of God’s purposes, and you say, “I want to be a part of that. I want to encourage others to say ... Listen, you think the church has a problem? Anyone can see that the church has problems, but do you see the glory, the unstoppable nature of God’s purposes? Paul went about not just saving people. He went about planting churches. God has a goal of community for the world to look at people getting along, black and white, rich and poor, every race together, loving one another in Jesus Christ.

The world sees that community, that love. God is glorified and the nations are changed. The purposes of God, the encourager motivates by calling people to the glory of God’s purposes.

Fifth and final characteristic of the encourager is he removes obstacles and he builds bridges. “Removes obstacles and builds bridges.” In the last three or four verses, 27 through 30, what happens? Agabus comes. He gives his prophesy, and the gentile church then sends an offering to help Jerusalem out. Who takes that offering? Well, Barnabas and Paul. They deliver it. If you will look at Barnabas’s life, you find him at these critical points where he’s a bridge builder. He’s bringing people together relationally and he’s removing potential obstacles.

The obstacle here is a division between Jerusalem and Antioch, a division between what was the sending church and Antioch, which now will be the sending church to the gentile nations. A racial division that could separate and divide the church and hinder what God is doing. Here’s this man of encouragement who sees God’s grace at work. He says, “Wow, this a potential threat. God’s bringing this prophetic word. I’m going to give myself to helping remove this obstacle and building a bridge.”

Barnabas did this type of thing all the time. Do you remember in Acts Chapter 9 when Paul got saved? It was Barnabas that went and got him and helped him

connect to the leaders in Jerusalem, because they were like, “Hey, this is just a ploy. We don’t believe this guy’s really saved.” It was Barnabas who was there introducing Paul to the leaders. It’s Barnabas here who goes and gets Paul, and he brings him to Antioch. Later when John, Mark and Saul have a falling out, Barnabas rushes to the aid of John Mark. He gives his life to removing hindrances, to removing obstacles and building bridges.

Now, there’s a lot I could say here, but I’m out of time, so I’m going to make this additional point before I conclude. The conclusion is about 45 minutes long, so stay with me.

Here it is. In some ways when we talk about racial tension and racial unity, I am the least qualified spokesperson. I live in the west. I live in America. I’m white. I’m a male. I’ve never been in the persecuted minority, so I have the least credibility in some senses to speak this message, but it is the message of the gospel, and you observe something here about the power of the gospel to bring change.

You see, the gentiles in one sense are the oppressed when it comes to spiritual things. The Jewish church, the keeper of the Old Testament and the keeper of the Revelation of God, there’s a struggle, like, do we even accept them? God comes in with the gospel and brings such a dramatic change so that the oppressed give to the oppressor.

Listen, you may not even be sure that you want us, but we’re going to send you money. You’re in a famine and we’re going to send you money, and that is the power of the gospel so that individuals say, “You know what? I can live my whole life protecting and cultivating an image of being a victim. I could hold on to the oppression against me for my whole life because it’s legitimate, it’s real. I could latch onto it and insist and insist and insist, but when Jesus comes in, he brings such a flood of forgiveness and mercy so that now I have really what I’m looking for,” and then you see real unity start to just explode when the oppressed reaches out to show love to the oppressor.

I know it’s a hard message and it’s a message that in some ways again I’m not the best candidate to share, but it is the message of the gospel, and we will close with this. The gospel brings an incredible change. The message of who Jesus is and what he’s done brings incredible change.

Think about it. Barnabas shows up in town. He's the delegate from Jerusalem. He's preaching. He's teaching. He does something that is really, it's remarkable. He goes and gets a better preacher. He goes and he gets Paul. He says, "You know what? God can use me here, but there's someone God can use more. I want to be the associate pastor." He goes and he gets Paul, and he brings Paul down, this incredible act of humility and how ... If you can just see the ministry of Paul, writing half the New Testament, starting churches, how Barnabas represents for us the change that God brings so that it's not about us.

This is a little speculative, but we think it's true. You know where Luke was from? Luke was from Antioch. Luke writes the Book of Acts. It's possible that Luke got saved through this very ministry in this very season.

We might not even be reading about this were it not for Barnabas and his encouragement as he comes in, and that's all made possible because of the faith that resides in the human heart when Jesus Christ comes in to say, "You know what? I'm not living just for this world. I'm not just living for this life. I'm living for eternity. I have the security of eternity and all of God's resources. Nothing is going to happen to me until God says it's the day, and then I go to be with him. I have nothing to fear. Let me just help everyone find out what God has for them and speak in faith the word of God to encourage them and strengthen them toward that end."

You know what? I believe Barnabas probably could have been a big deal in Antioch. Instead he was a big deal in Antioch and a big deal in Paul's life and a big deal in Luke's life and a big deal in the planting of church after church after church, the writing of the New Testament. Why? Because he'd been changed by the gospel of Jesus Christ.