

**Barnabas, a Dramatic Monologue**  
**Pastor Steve Newman**  
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You know me as Barnabas, but I was born as Joseph, a Levite from the island of Cyprus, where a significant Jewish colony resided. I had found my way to Jerusalem and was among the earliest to respond to the apostles' message that Jesus was the long-hoped-for Messiah. Jerusalem had been full of excitement. When Jesus entered during the days leading up to Passover, many were proclaiming him king, but then the Romans arrested him and had him crucified. We all wanted to stay out of trouble with the Romans because they could be ruthless. Crucifixions were not rare. What a painful, humiliating way to die! We all thought that Jesus must have been just another pretender, but then reports started spreading that he had risen from the dead! Of course, that was hard to believe, but the disciples of Jesus repeatedly proclaimed that they had seen him. They seemed so sincere, and I knew their lives were at risk for publicly saying such things. I also knew that reports had spread that his tomb was empty and the Romans and Jewish leaders could not produce his body to prove he was still dead. The Holy Spirit opened my heart and I believed.

Many of those who came to faith were rejected by family members or lost a significant amount of their business, so they could not support their families. I and many others contributed what we had to help out our new family of faith. If it was true that Jesus had sacrificed so much that he died for me on the cross, it seemed a small thing to throw in my financial resources to help out this new movement. I did not think it was such a big thing because many were generous in those days. Still, Luke wrote about it in his second work, the Acts of the Apostles, *"Now the full number of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one said that any of the things that belonged to him was his own, but they had everything in common. And with great power the apostles were giving their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all. There was not a needy person among them, for as many as were owners of lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold and laid it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need. Thus Joseph, who was also called by the apostles Barnabas (which means son of encouragement), a Levite, a native of Cyprus, sold a field that belonged to him and brought the money and laid it at the apostles' feet."* (Acts 4:32-37) I am sure that if the love of Jesus has touched you, it has also opened up your heart to share your resources.

As you can read, they called me Barnabas, which means Son of Encouragement. It was so encouraging to them for me to give so generously.

As I said, though, it did not seem extraordinary to me. This was the need. I think God has equipped me with a personality to encourage others in various ways.

This gift of encouragement reappeared several weeks later in a way that I could not have known at the time how important it was. Life can be like that, can't it? You do little things without knowing which are huge things that can significantly impact good or evil. Of course, I had heard about Saul, later to be called Paul, a ruthless zealot. He went house to house, finding Christians and dragging them out for punishment or even stoning. We all feared him and tried to keep out of his way. He saw our Christian faith as an affront to authentic Judaism. Claiming that Jesus was the Messiah would undermine our adherence to our traditions. He was sure that Jesus was another false Messiah. We had had them before. Saul was the one who had presided over the stoning of Stephen, a man of great faith who proclaimed the truth of the Lord openly in Jerusalem only to arouse the intense anger of the Jewish leaders who had him stoned to death.

But now I had heard that Saul had come to faith in Jesus. The rumor was that Jesus himself had appeared to Saul on the road to Damascus, and now Saul was a believer. I had been in Damascus then and heard Saul preach boldly out in the public square. Some said that it was all a trap so that he could find out who the Christians were and get them arrested. But I knew from his preaching that this was real. He was a dramatically changed man. The apostles still feared Saul, but I took him to Jerusalem and vouched for him. Luke told about it in Acts 9:27, *"But Barnabas took him and brought him to the apostles and declared to them how on the road he had seen the Lord, who spoke to him, and how at Damascus he had preached boldly in the name of Jesus."* This opened the door for Saul to be accepted by the church leaders and join in spreading the Gospel. It is not always those who are in the front of things whom God uses. He used me to encourage the church leaders and to make a way for Saul to lay a foundation for further ministry. Without that encouragement, who knows how long Paul's participation might have been delayed.

Because of my gift for encouragement and the trust that the apostles had developed towards me due to my selling the land and giving the money to the church and my helping them come to accept Saul, they gave me another important job of encouragement. The persecution that had arisen and the death of Stephen caused many believers in Jerusalem to fear for their lives, so they scattered abroad to many places, as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus, and Antioch. At first, they shared the good news about Jesus our Messiah only with other Jews. He was the fulfillment of our desires and our longings. But then some Jews from Cyprus and Cyrene came to Antioch and started sharing the gospel with Gentiles! This was something new. They had decided that this message of

Jesus the Messiah was not just a Jewish message. It was for Gentiles, too, for the whole world! Isaiah had written about this in one of his prophecies of the Messiah,

“It is too light a thing that you should be my servant  
to raise up the tribes of Jacob  
and to bring back the preserved of Israel;  
I will make you as a light for the nations,  
that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth.” (Isaiah 49:6)

Many people had come to faith in Jesus at their preaching. However, the church leaders in Jerusalem did not yet know what to do with this. So they sent me to Antioch to find out what was going on and assess it. This made sense because I, too, was from Cyprus. When I came, I immediately saw the grace of God at work among these people and rejoiced greatly! I exhorted them all to remain faithful to the Lord with steadfast purpose.

Then the Lord spoke to my heart, and I knew who the right man would be to help with this young church in Antioch. I had heard that Saul was in Tarsus, where he originally came from, so I went there, found him, and brought him to Antioch. For a whole year, Saul and I stayed in Antioch, teaching them the way of the Lord. We taught them from the Jewish scriptures and what the Lord revealed to us. Oh, and it was in Antioch that the followers of Jesus were first called Christians. [ see Acts 11:19-26]

Some prophets came to Antioch predicting a coming famine. The church felt that it would hit the believers in Judea the hardest since many were experiencing persecution there, so they took up a generous offering and sent Saul and me to take it to Jerusalem. When we returned to Antioch, we brought my cousin John Mark along. You know him as the writer of the second gospel. When he was in Jerusalem, John Mark was taken with Peter and followed him around frequently. It was from Peter’s preaching that his gospel came. [see Acts 12:25]

What happened next was epic, opening a whole new chapter in the movement of Christianity. Up to this point, the church had only consisted of Jews in Jerusalem and those who had scattered due to the persecution. Gentiles in Antioch had come to faith, too, but no Christians had gone from Antioch to preach about Christ and to reach new people. But now the Holy Spirit stirred up the church to begin the first true missionary movement, deliberately going to people who had not heard of Jesus Christ and the salvation he was offering to all through faith.

Here is what Luke wrote about the critical church meeting that was to birth this missionary movement. “*Now there were in the church at Antioch prophets and*

*teachers, Barnabas, Simeon who was called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen a lifelong friend of Herod the tetrarch, and Saul. While they were worshiping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, 'Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.'* Then, after fasting and praying, they laid their hands on them and sent them off." **(Acts 13:1-3)**

Most Christians stay where they are and are consumed simply with the affairs of life before them. But Jesus Christ commanded his disciples to take the gospel to the whole world, to every tribe and tongue. He died for all, loved all, and wants all people to come to faith and salvation. We were about to do something no one had yet done. The church sent us off to take the gospel to other lands.

We first went to Cyprus, where I grew up. As it became our custom, we went first to the Jews. They were the ones who should be expecting their Messiah. They had all the promises of the prophets. They were the ones who had been prepared by the Law to understand sin and the need for sacrifices. God had prepared us Jews to be ready for the message that we were sinful and needed a sacrifice and that Jesus was the ultimate sacrifice for us. Just as our ancestors of old sacrificed lambs and placed the blood of the lambs over their doorposts in Egypt to be spared from the judgment of the angel of death who was sent out over Egypt, so now we had come to know that Jesus was the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. He is the one who died for us as a sacrifice. We Jews were prepared to hear this, but not all wanted to listen to it. This message threatened our fleshly pride, telling us we could be good enough and needed no Savior.

Word got around Cyprus about our message, and the proconsul, Sergius Paulus, summoned me and Saul to come and tell him of this message from God. But in his court, a Jewish magician named Elymas opposed us before Sergius Paulus. Saul, who was also called Paul, became angry with his opposition. Filled with the Holy Spirit, he looked intently at him and said, "You son of the devil, you enemy of all righteousness, full of all deceit and villainy, will you not stop making crooked the straight paths of the Lord? And now, behold, the hand of the Lord is upon you, and you will be blind and unable to see the sun for a time." (Acts 13:10-11a) Immediately, mist and darkness fell on this unbelieving magician, and he was blind and had to find someone to lead him. The proconsul was impressed with what Paul had done and believed in Jesus, astonished by this miracle and the teaching of the Lord we gave. **[see Acts 13:4-12]**

When we left Cyprus, we continued sailing until we came from Perga in Pamphylia. From there, we traveled on to Antioch of Pisidia (not the same Antioch we had started from, which was in Syria). When we got there, we went to the synagogue to worship with our fellow Jews. As was the custom when

travelers came to them, they asked us if we had any word of encouragement for the people. Paul stood up and recounted the history of Israel leading up to Jesus. He started with Moses, then recounted the time of the conquest, followed by the time of the Judges. Then he talked about the kings until he came to David. He then proclaimed that God had raised up an offspring of David to be our Savior. He then spoke of his death and resurrection, indicating God's fulfillment of Psalm 2, in which God had said, "You are my Son, today I have begotten you."

The people were fascinated by this message and filled with hope. They begged us to come back the following week. It seemed like the whole city turned out to hear us, which only made the synagogue leaders jealous. When they opposed us, we told them it was right for the message to come first to them, but since they rejected it, we would take it next to the Gentiles. The Gentiles who came near to the synagogue to hear were thrilled. But the Jewish leaders incited the devout women of high standing and the leading men of the city, stirred up persecution against us, and drove us out of their district. We shook the dust off our feet and traveled on to Iconium. **[see Acts 13:13-52]**

Friends, you should not be surprised when some violently oppose the message of Jesus Christ. You might wonder how anyone could object to the wonderful news that God loves them and sent his Son to die for them so that they could have eternal life. But that is not all that is happening. God's offer of grace insults people who will not admit they need it. How dare anyone suggest that they are not good enough to earn salvation for themselves?

At Iconium, we had a great opportunity to proclaim the gospel. We again entered the synagogue and spoke boldly of the Lord in such a way that many Jews and Gentiles believed. You see at synagogues in every city, a considerable number of Gentiles hung out, being attracted to the high moral monotheism of Judaism and repelled by the moral bankruptcy of paganism, but not being ready to be circumcised and convert fully to Judaism. But the unbelieving Jewish leaders again became jealous and stirred up many of the leading Gentiles in the city to oppose us. But we continued to preach boldly, and God granted us several signs and wonders to convince the people. But God did not protect us from opposition. He does not promise to do that. He will help us through such problems but does not promise to keep us from problems, opposition, or suffering. When we found out that they intended to stone us, we fled the city and traveled on to Lystra, where we continued to preach the gospel. **[see Acts 14:1-7]**

At Lystra we came upon a man who was crippled from birth. He was listening to Paul's preaching when Paul looked at him intently and said in a loud voice,

“Stand up on your feet.” The man sprang up immediately and began walking. The crowd got very excited and concluded that we were Greek gods who had come down from heaven in human form. They were calling me Zeus and Paul, Hermes, the spokesman of the gods. And the priest of Zeus, whose temple was at the entrance to the city, brought oxen and garlands to the gates and wanted to offer sacrifice with the crowds. But when we heard of it, we tore our garments and rushed out into the crowd, crying out, “Men, why are you doing these things? We also are men, of like nature with you, and we bring you good news, that you should turn from these vain things to a living God, who made the heaven and the earth and the sea and all that is in them. In past generations, he allowed all the nations to walk in their own ways. Yet he did not leave himself without witness, for he did good by giving you rains from heaven and fruitful seasons, satisfying your hearts with food and gladness.” Even with these words, we scarcely restrained the people from offering sacrifice to us. **[see Acts 14:8-18]**

But Jews came from Antioch and Iconium to Lystra, persuading the crowd that Paul was a troublemaker. They took him outside the city and stoned him until he was presumed dead. I had never been so scared in my life. Paul, my missionary companion, was lying dead, and I thought I would be next. But God was not finished with him yet, and they did not try to stone me. So God raised Paul from that death, and we went back into Lystra until we all walked on to Derbe the next day. **[see Acts 14:19-21]**

We then returned to Lystra, Iconium and Antioch of Pisidia, yes into the very cities from which our fiercest persecution came, and in each city we strengthened the souls of the disciples and encouraged them to continue in the faith, warning them that they would enter the kingdom of God through many tribulations. We then appointed elders for the churches in every city and committed them to the Lord with much prayer and fasting. **[see Acts 14:19-23]**

We then returned to our home church in Antioch of Syria to report to them all that God had done and how he had opened a door among the Gentiles. We then stayed with the church for several months, worshiping and working with them. **[see Acts 14:24-28]**

But some men came down from Judea and were teaching the brothers, “Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved.” Paul and I had no small debate with them over this matter. We saw it as distorting and denying the gospel from salvation by grace into salvation by grace plus works. Paul and I were chosen to go to Jerusalem to the apostles there to settle this matter. If it could not be settled, we would have two gospels - one freely offering grace to all people, but the other saying that salvation grace could only come to one who first became a Jew through circumcision. We told of what

we had witnessed among the Gentiles. Then Peter stood up and recounted how the Lord directed him to go to Cornelius, a Gentile and Roman centurion, and preach the gospel and how the Lord sent the Holy Spirit upon Cornelius without having to be circumcised and become a Jew first. We told about the signs and wonders God had worked through us among the Gentiles. The apostle James, the brother of the Lord, who was the church's leader in Jerusalem, then said that all this conformed with the words of the prophet Amos, who had said that salvation would come to Gentiles. This council in Jerusalem concluded with us that we need not tell Gentiles that they needed circumcision to come to salvation. **[see Acts 15:1-21]**

The council sent Silas and a man named Judas to go with us to Antioch and tell the church of their decision. The church rejoiced to hear of this decision. Silas and Judas gave great encouragement and exhortation to the fellowship, and we remained there for many days. **[see Acts 15:22-35]**

After this came an unhappy conflict with Paul. Yes, it is true that believers cannot always agree. And after some days Paul said to me, "Let us return and visit the brothers in every city where we proclaimed the word of the Lord, and see how they are." I wanted to take with us John called Mark. But Paul thought it best not to take one who had withdrawn from us in Pamphylia and had not gone with us to the work. There arose a sharp disagreement, and we separated from each other. I took Mark with me and sailed away to Cyprus, but Paul chose Silas and departed, having been commended by the brothers to the grace of the Lord. He went through Syria and Cilicia, strengthening the churches. **[see Acts 15:36-41]**

I continued with John Mark and worked in travels not recorded by Luke. Paul could be pretty stubborn-headed. But I could also. But God used our troubles to continue to spread the gospel, as we each went to different places. Paul and I did not continue in partnership, but our friendship could never end. Even Paul's affection for John Mark was not ended by our disagreement as you can see from one of his later letters in which he writes, "*Aristarchus my fellow prisoner greets you, and Mark the cousin of Barnabas (concerning whom you have received instructions—if he comes to you, welcome him).*" (Colossians 4:10)

My life was filled with wonder. Not all was easy. It was most frightening to see the leaders of various cities turn against us and even more so to see Paul stoned to death. But nothing could have been more satisfying than to see the church of Jesus Christ planted in regions where the gospel had not yet gone.

Through it all, I saw God use my gift of encouragement. I was the one who saw Paul's potential and the reality of his faith, and I helped the church leaders in

Jerusalem overcome their fears of him. I went to Tarsus and brought Paul to Antioch to help me build up that new church, which became the important church from which the first missionary movement was launched. I saw my cousin John Mark's potential and stayed with him despite his failure on our previous mission trip. Because of that, he could remain in ministry and mission and have a lasting effect on the church by writing his gospel. You may not see it, but I was also willing to take second place. When Paul and I are mentioned earlier in our journey, Luke always says, "Barnabas and Saul." Then, as Paul's stature increased, he shifted to "Paul and Barnabas." I did not mind. The important thing was not my status or any comparison between us. The critical thing was serving the Lord. I hope it is for you, too. We each have our parts to play in the Kingdom of Christ. Comparisons between us do not matter.

When you think of Barnabas, the Son of Encouragement, I hope you can be inspired. It might be that God wants to make you into a Daughter of Encouragement or a Son of Encouragement. See who you can encourage this week. You never know. That person may turn out to have an important part to play in the Kingdom of God that you enable, just as I enabled Paul.