

Today we're talking about a person who many believers have heard of and know a bit about. But here's the deal: by God's reckoning, this man is surely slated as one of the uppermost rewarded persons in Kingdom history. And that's true from several angles. *And* it's likely you could think I'm talking about Paul... the apostle, missionary, and writer of much of the New Testament! Of course, this much is very true: as a headliner for two millennia, Paul is a unique, towering figure in Kingdom history. And we've been referencing Paul in past episodes and expect to continue to dive more deeply into what he has written.

But today, the person we're talking about is *Barnabas*. Oh, you might say, I remember Barnabas, he was known as the encourager in the early church. Yeah, that's right, his real name was Joseph, but he was called "Barnabas" by early believers, which means "Son of Encouragement." And, boy, with the strife and issues faced by the early church...inside and out...having a great encourager was surely a great blessing!

And, now that you've thought about it, you might want to add that Barnabas tagged along sometimes with Paul in his travels. Well, yes...but the impact of Barnabas goes a whole lot deeper than that. Let's take a dive into telling a largely chronological account of the life of Barnabas—and it's likely you'll be a bit stunned at the roles Barnabas played in actually guiding and steering the newfangled, disruptive, contentious, multi-ethnic, ragtag group of believers in those key years not long after the Cross and the Resurrection. And, you know what, the story of Barnabas is very instructive to us today, even worthy of a biographical movie about how vigorous, forward-looking, yet reconciling obedience to Christ is done well!

So. Barnabas was a Levite from the island of Cyprus in the Mediterranean, close to Europe, Asia, *and* the Middle East. And that marks Barnabas right from the start—he seemed to always be between and bridging different places, different peoples, and different individual temperaments. Yes, an unusual, impactful guy.

The Biblical account of Barnabas starts very early on with his generosity in selling a piece of land and laying the full proceeds at the apostles' feet. That set the stage for the infamous Ananias and Sapphira story when the two of them apparently tried to appear as generous as Barnabas by looking like they were doing the same—except they held back part of the money they got. Both husband and wife were deceivers of the church, and both immediately fell dead (Acts 5). Not your typical modern church story, huh?

Now Saul (who later became the Apostle Paul) was zealously persecuting the early church. But soon enough, God apprehended Saul on the road to Damascus and, in due course, Saul was saved. Immediately Saul proclaimed Jesus in the synagogues...and all were amazed. He "confounded the Jews who lived in Damascus by proving Jesus was the Christ." (Acts 9:22) They plotted to kill Saul so he escaped to Jerusalem and tried to join the disciples of Jesus. But they were afraid and didn't believe Saul was a true disciple.

"But Barnabus took [Saul] and brought him to the apostles and declared to them how on the road [Saul] had seen the Lord, who spoke to him, and how at Damascus he had preached boldly in the name of Jesus." (Acts 9:27) Yes, Barnabas was the reconciling force that brought the aggressive Saul into fellowship with the anchoring church in Jerusalem. The apostles accepted Saul, and that was key to amazing future events. But after some of Saul's contentious disputations, the brothers sent Saul off to Tarsus, his hometown.

God was getting busy working with the Apostle Peter, giving him a vision of the opening of the Gospel to the Gentiles, one of the truly pivotal events in world history—only embraced after the evidence spoken of God's gift of the Holy Spirit to the Gentiles. Now, due to persecution, believers had scattered to Phoenicia and Cyprus and Antioch. Ah...Antioch, that's where some Greeks heard the good news preached *and believed!* The Jerusalem church responded by sending Barnabas to Antioch to ensure all the goings-on were appropriate. So, Barnabas journeyed to Antioch. And here's the report...in Scripture.

"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. And a great many people were added to the Lord. So Barnabas went to Tarsus to look for Saul, and when he had found [Saul], 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." (Acts 11:23-26 ESV)

We simply cannot overestimate the impact of this event in Kingdom history. Antioch became a powerful, multi-ethnic, pioneering missionary church because the standard that Barnabas maturely applied right then was *the grace of God*...not the Law...not tradition...not Jew-only ethnicity. Then he recalled that Saul was in Tarsus. Yeah, the Saul who knew every important detail about the Law, tradition, the Hebrews... but Saul had been sidelined in cosmopolitan, worldly, pagan Tarsus as a tentmaker *for about ten years since leaving Jerusalem*—yet growing mightily in the Lord! *Ten years of a normally-zealous Paul abiding, waiting on the Lord's timing...and now Barnabas sensitive to recruiting a man he hadn't engaged in years!*

You see, Barnabas knew by the Holy Spirit that Saul could help deftly handle all the questions asked in the church at Antioch, questions about *everything*...the Law and ethnicity and the Resurrection and the Holy Spirit. That's how an all-nations-focused church and mission were forged...by the teachings of Barnabas and Saul! Then the first mission of Antioch was in response to a famine...to send relief to fellow believers in Judea. And they appointed Barnabas and Saul to do that. Just so, a great missionary team was created!

Barnabas and Saul returned from Jerusalem, bringing along Barnabas' young cousin, John Mark. And in due course, the church at Antioch sent those three on what's now called "Paul's first missionary journey." They sailed to Cyprus and ministered there, then went beyond that to a number of key cities. There was much resistance and persecution, all the way to Paul's being stoned to lifelessness, but then he stood up, completely healed! Ultimately, Barnabas and Saul returned to the church at Antioch, "where they had been commended to the grace of God for the work that they had fulfilled. And when they arrived and gather the church together, they declared all that God had done with them, and how he had opened a door of faith to the Gentiles. And they remained no little time with the disciples." (Acts 14:26-28)

Then, the first church council...the Jerusalem Council...convened about whether to compel believers to be circumcised. Barnabas and Saul—now called Paul—gave amazing reports about what signs and wonders God had done through them among the Gentiles. Ultimately, Peter and James settled the matter in favor of the *grace of God alone*. So, Barnabas was central, yes, *instrumental* in settling an absolutely vital issue in Kingdom history, as the Bible reports it. Sadly, for many today, similar stumbling blocks still abound.

But a real rift developed between Paul and Barnabas because John Mark had left the first missionary trip early. So, for the next missionary journey, Paul and Barnabas separated, with Paul now teaming up with Silas. Barnabas, ever the encourager with great foresight about Kingdom resources, instead disciplined John Mark more—yes, the very John Mark who later wrote Mark's Gospel and later *did* serve with Paul himself.

There is much, much to ponder here about Barnabas, a man often reduced in Christians' minds to just one word: *encourager*. But still, what a laudatory label, his very name changed in everyday usage to Barnabas, Son of Encouragement. We should all be labelled so by our family...our coworkers...our fellow believers!

But look once more at this extraordinary man's portion of Kingdom events: Barnabas, an early Jewish believer...Barnabas, a pioneering giver of great generosity...Barnabas, a trusted brother in Christ in the Jerusalem church who successfully advocated for the deeply distrusted Saul...then, again, Barnabas, a very trusted brother sent to ensure the validity and proper path of the ethnically-ground-breaking church at Antioch...Barnabas, the savvy recruiter of the long-sidelined Saul to help train believers at Antioch and thus start grounding Christian doctrine for the ages...Barnabas, leader of the Barnabas-Saul team to bring pioneering relief from the Antioch church to the Jerusalem church...Barnabas, co-missionary with Saul of the first grand missionary journey of the early church...Barnabas, case-presenter with Saul regarding the divisive grace vs. circumcision debate at the foundational Jerusalem Council...Barnabas, defender and then effective mentor of John Mark, who was ultimately a Gospel writer and co-laborer with his critic, Paul...and remember, not least, permeating it all, Barnabas, the encourager of all in the Lord! *Stunning*.

Hey, sometimes, all of us, like Barnabas, may feel like we operate in the shadow of folks like Paul. But that thinking leaves out God Himself—do you think God has forgotten the unique contributions of Barnabas? And neither will God forget you as you might operate in the shadow of others. *Now that's encouraging!*

A&A: Application & Action

1. Do you sometimes feel like a perhaps-overshadowed Barnabas in key roles you have had or currently have, no matter how valuable your contribution? Do you have faith *and contentment* that God is keeping score...or do you *not* have that faith and contentment? Discuss.

2. So, you're a serious Bible reader and Kingdom citizen. How much of the depth and breadth of the story of Barnabas did you really, seriously remember as part of your toolkit? Could it be we're all missing an opportunity of knowing the depth of similar stories of our family members, our coworkers, our brothers and sisters in Christ? Discuss.

3. Do you consistently work to be the encourager in all your God-given roles, the level of encourager that Barnabas was? Discuss.