

BaptistWay Bible Series for July

1: Always encouraging

June 21, 2012

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Barnabas had an impressive ministry in the early church. His given name was Joseph. He was a Jew of notable standing as a Levite. While serving the Jerusalem church during its difficult early years, his Christian character and encouraging ministry drew such attention the apostles called him Barnabas. The name “Barnabas” means “son of encouragement.” In Hebrew usage, the phrase “son of” means “characterized by.” The early church felt Barnabas’ ministry was characterized by encouragement. Barnabas was the Lord’s gift to the struggling church.

Barnabas first appears in Acts 4:36-37, where he made an extraordinary and generous contribution to the Jerusalem church. Presenting the proceeds from the sale of land went a long way to encourage the church as it struggled in its duty to minister to believers in need of daily sustenance. Many believers had been excommunicated from their families for following Christ. Some also lost their income when they were unable to continue with the family business.

The burden for sustaining these outcasts until they could get on their feet fell upon the early church. The church readily accepted this ministry challenge, but the volume of need placed a heavy burden upon it. Barnabas’ contribution eased this situation in more than a monetary way. Believers also were encouraged by his generosity. Through Barnabas’ gift, they saw the Lord momentarily providing for his financially stressed people.

From the earliest days of the Christian movement, believers carried the gospel into surrounding areas or to the destinations of their travels. Acts

11:19 indicates persecution scattered believers as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus and Antioch. Phoenicia coincides with modern-day Lebanon. Cyprus was an adjacent, major island from which Barnabas came. Antioch was the old capital of the Seleucid Empire and the largest city on the eastern seaboard of the Mediterranean Sea. It was the gateway city to all points east and was, at the time, the third-largest city in the Roman Empire.

As Christianity spread northward from Jerusalem, no one expected Antioch would provide a fertile territory for Christian advancement. Very quickly, this Gentile city would become the leading city of Christianity, surpassing the number of believers in Jerusalem.

Verse 19 indicates the gospel only was proclaimed to Jews as Christianity advanced up the eastern Mediterranean coast. In Antioch, however (v. 20), the gospel also was proclaimed to Hellenists, referring to persons of Greek culture, but in actuality indicating Gentiles. The shift to focus upon the Gentile harvest was a key moment in Christian history. From verse 21, and its corresponding point in time, Christianity would be dominated by Gentile believers. The power of the Lord was evident in this unexpected shift and the Antioch church grew rapidly.

Such a massive, growing church had many practical needs. Antioch leaders requested assistance from Jerusalem (v. 22). Jerusalem's answer was to send Barnabas, their veteran encourager who could catalyze creative solutions to the church's plight.

Barnabas' character and ability to discern God's movement is described in verses 23-24. Barnabas noticed God was pouring out his grace upon the believers in Antioch. This spiritual discernment would come to play in a number of situations: the affirmation of the authenticity of Saul's (the Apostle Paul) Christian ministry (Acts 9:27); the affirmation of genuine Gentile conversion in Antioch (Acts 15:2); the affirmation of the usefulness of John Mark in apostolic mission (Acts 15:37).

The great message of an encourager is seen in verse 23. Barnabas exhorted the believers to remain faithful to the Lord and steadfast in their devotion to him. Though Antioch believers faced many challenges to their faith, Barnabas assured them faithfulness was worthwhile. Evidence of God's presence among the Antioch Christians was abundant. Barnabas could see it. Believers should therefore take courage and continue pressing forward in their faith.

Barnabas' Christian character traits are found in verse 24: goodness, full of the Holy Spirit and full of faith. His active walk with Christ produced such notable character traits from which flowed his generous and encouraging ways.

The result of Barnabas' ministry of encouragement was many more believers were added to the church. No time-outs were taken for reorganization. The church, now encouraged, pressed on in its labors for Christ. The massive growth of the Antioch church caused Barnabas to seek someone with strong preaching and teaching ability.

Once again, Barnabas' spiritual discernment carried the day. He traveled to Tarsus to locate Saul and convince him to join the ministry in Antioch (v. 25). The teaming of Barnabas and Saul was so effective that believers advanced spiritually. Their eager devotion was so outstanding believers were first called Christians in Antioch (v. 26)!

Acts 15:36-40 records a dark moment in Christian history. The apostolic team of Paul and Barnabas decided to return to the churches founded on their prior journey, to encourage and strengthen believers. Barnabas, ever the affirmer and encourager, wanted to include John Mark, who had abandoned the prior journey. Paul, a notable recipient of Barnabas' affirmation and encouragement, strongly resisted the inclusion of John Mark. The dispute led to the dissolution of the Paul's and Barnabas' association. Barnabas soon departed for Cyprus with John Mark, never to

be mentioned again in the book of Acts.

From generosity to spiritual discernment, the study of Barnabas presents a great portrait of one capable of inspiring believers to persist in faithfulness and aspire to the heights of faith. Also in Barnabas is found insight into the way that God provides encouragement in difficult and stressful situations.