



## Encouraging the Mission: Barnabas Saw God's Grace & Was Glad

Behold Our God – Read the Bible for Life Series #49

Select Passages from Acts

Pastor David Sunday

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Please open your Bibles to Acts 4. We're going to read several passages this morning as we trace the story of a man's life by the name of Barnabas in the book of Acts. The first passage we're going to look at is from Acts 4.

A few weeks ago I mentioned that we seem to be going through a season of particularly heavy affliction in the life of our church, with untimely deaths and unexpected afflictions. Some in our church family are facing the wearying effects of long term illnesses and the difficulty of the treatments. There are relational burdens. There is heavy turmoil and secret trials. There is the ongoing battle against sin at which the Bible says we should not be surprised. The book of Hebrews says, *"In your struggle against sin you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood."* All who follow Jesus Christ can expect heaviness, hardship and adversity.

Amy Carmichael, who knew much of this adversity, wrote a little poem in which she asked, "Hast thou no scar? Hast thou no hidden scar on foot or side or hand?" Then she said, "Can he have followed far who has no wound or scar?"

If we follow Jesus for any length of time, we will be wounded and scarred. There will be times when we feel like hope is just evaporating and we need a fresh infusion of hope which is what encouragement brings. The ministry of encouragement infuses hope in God's people.

I don't think it's any accident that over the last several weeks, we as a church have been focusing on the theme of mission—God's Mission: Our Vision—and how we need to be wholeheartedly engaged in the pursuit of the Kingdom and the advancement of the gospel around the world. But I can imagine that someone has been thinking through these last weeks, "How can I engage myself wholly in the mission of God when my own heart feels so overwhelmed by adversity?"

Sometimes when we hear about what God wants us to do in the world, we silently check out because we're thinking, "That's going to have to wait for another time and place. I can't be involved in that. I can't handle that right now because there's so much happening in my own life."

I'm thankful that probably more than any other New Testament book, the book of Acts is designed to show us the history of God's mission in the world and to encourage our hearts about the advancement of the gospel into all the world. In this book, Luke very skillfully weaves a vignette of truths about a particular man named Barnabas, who played a strategic role in the church. Barnabas is to Luke—the author of Acts—a man who is a model disciple because he is committed to two things simultaneously. Barnabas is committed to the mission of God and is equally committed to the encouragement of the body of Christ. Luke wants us to see these two things working side by side.

As the mission of God goes forward in the world, there is a need for a surge of Barnabas-like encouragers in the body of Christ. In order for God's mission to advance, we need to be on the alert as to ways in which we can encourage and exercise the gift of encouragement to instill hope in one another. We're introduced to Barnabas in Acts 4, and we find out in verse 36 that Barnabas was not his real name. His real name was Joseph—a great name. (There is nothing wrong with the name Joseph if that's your name). But they didn't call him that because he reminded them through his encouragement of another name, so they nicknamed him, "Barnabas" meaning "Son of Encouragement."

That gift so marked Barnabas' life that they started calling him the "Son of Encouragement." If your friends tried to select a nickname for you, would it ever occur to them to call you "Barnabas" or something that spoke of encouragement? That's how special this man was. He encouraged so much that they just named him "Son of Encouragement." We're going to look at some of the traits of his life so we can learn how to fulfill this biblical command in 1 Thessalonians 5:11: *"Therefore encourage one another and build one another up, just as you are doing... And we urge you, brothers, admonish the idle, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, be patient with them all."*

## **1. Generosity**

How can we learn from the life of Barnabas to be encouragers? We're going to look at a number of traits. The first is right here in Acts 4—his generosity. Let's read verses 36 and 37.

*“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.”*

We know that in the first century several Levites were known for their outstanding wealth and education. We also know that ownership of land was a principle source of wealth and social standing in the Greco-Roman world at that time. Having land and being a Levite, Barnabas was probably a notably wealthy person of high social standing. But these things had no grip on him. He was freed from the love of money and things. He was willing to give it away because he was so satisfied with Christ.

In a very unpretentious way, without making a press release about it, he sells the field that belongs to him, brings the money and lays it at the apostles’ feet. Why? Because he’s committed to the body of Christ and there are people in the body with whom he is sharing this common mission to bring the gospel to all who have needs. Barnabas, who has more, wants to be a blessing to his brothers and sisters in Christ who have need. He crosses social barriers to benefit those in need because he is whole-heartedly engaged in the mission of the gospel. That gift of generosity can be a great encouragement to people.

Whenever I think about generosity, I think about the early years of our marriage when we were working in the youth ministry of our church. We thought we were doing great if we could pay the phone bill each month. My great-grandma, Nana Gert, was 96 when Kate and I got married—she lived to be 103. By the age of 96, her handwriting was not good. She would keep envelopes in her top drawer and whenever she had extra cash, she’d fill the envelopes up, scratch our address on the envelope and put a stamp on it. When you looked at that envelope, it was obvious that it was filled with money—cash. She’d drop it in the mail and send it to us on a regular basis. What an encouragement that was!

At the same time, there was someone (we’ll never know who) in our church who would send us a type-written envelope so we couldn’t tell who it was from with gift certificates to Dominick’s grocery store which was just down the street. There was always a little note in there that would say, “First of 12; second of 12; third of 12,” so we knew more would be coming. What an encouragement that was!

I remember when Kate was sick how so many of God’s people blessed us with meals and by meeting practical needs. How that encourages us as we seek to live for Jesus and fulfill His mission in the world.

As you think about being an encourager—a mobilizer of the mission—think of ways this week that you might bless someone with a meal, an anonymous financial provision or a gift card. That was the first trait of Barnabas' encouraging life.

## 2. Advocacy of God's Work in New Believers

The second was his advocacy of God's work in new believers—his welcoming of new believers. We see this in Acts 9 where we have the story of Saul's conversion. Immediately after Saul was converted, he got to work preaching the gospel. We read in verse 20 that *"immediately he proclaimed Jesus in the synagogues, saying, 'He is the Son of God.'"* He was welcomed at first but after some time of doing this preaching, opposition started to rise against Saul. Saul is the man who later on becomes the Apostle Paul.

Look at Acts 9:23-25.

*When many days had passed, the Jews plotted to kill him, but their plot became known to Saul. They were watching the gates day and night in order to kill him, but his disciples took him by night and let him down through an opening in the wall, lowering him in a basket.*

Saul escapes from Damascus and goes to Jerusalem where you would think this man who has been preaching Jesus would find safe haven amongst the believers in the church there. But when he gets to the church in Jerusalem, he encounters suspicion—not a gracious welcome. Verse 26 says, *"And when he had come to Jerusalem, he attempted to join the disciples. And they were all afraid of him, for they did not believe that he was a disciple."*

At the recent Mission Conference dinner, we watched a film about a Muslim man who became a believer in Chicago and then flew back to his home country, an Arab country. In the church there he did not meet a warm welcome at first, but resistance and suspicion, wondering if maybe this man was a spy.

That's what Saul was facing from the church in Jerusalem. They knew he had been a persecutor and were wondering if they should welcome him. But Barnabas becomes his advocate. He sees what God is doing in and through Saul's life, takes the risk and believes in the work of God in Saul. Look at verse 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."*

Barnabas is a respected, seasoned leader in the church. He's been walking with the Lord for a long time. When he speaks up as Saul's advocate, Saul is then welcomed into the

church. Verse 28 says, *“So he went in and out among them at Jerusalem, preaching boldly in the name of the Lord.”* Barnabas steps up to the plate for Saul, vouches for his testimony and makes for a warm welcome. It took a risk to be an advocate just like it takes a risk for us to welcome new and broken people into our church. But Barnabas was the type of guy who not only welcomed from a distance but came alongside, took him by the hand, brought him in and assimilated him.

Someone has written, “There is much in the church to be cautious about, but often we are suspicious and skeptical when we ought to be rejoicing. Too often we are negative and critical when we ought to be praising God. Too often we are doubtful and cautious when we ought to be amazed at what God has done; despondent and depressed when we ought to be expecting great things from God.”

Barnabas was clearly on the positive-advocacy side, welcoming Saul into the church. It’s no surprise as we move to chapter 11 that Barnabas is the one they send to Antioch when God is birthing a new work there. Let’s begin reading at Acts 11:19. There was a persecution that arose and from that persecution there was a scattering.

*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 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.*

They’re now preaching the Gospel to Gentiles, and amazingly in verse 21, *“And the hand of the Lord was with them, and a great number who believed turned to the Lord.”* Here is a new birth of Gentile converts, without any initiative from the Jerusalem church, without any strategizing on their behalf. God is doing a work and a church is being born among the Gentile people. In verse 22 we read, *“The report of this came to the ears of the church in Jerusalem, and they sent Barnabas to Antioch.”* Why? Because he had already proven himself to be an advocate of the work of God. He knew people. He wasn’t afraid to break open new ground. He didn’t hold people at arm’s length. So they sent Barnabas to investigate what was going on in Antioch.

### **3. Joyful Vision**

Look at Acts 11:23-24 which brings us to another trait of Barnabas’ encouragement—His joyful vision.

*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.*

Barnabas had joyful vision. He comes into a new work of God—a young church without a strong background in the Scripture. There's lots of room for growth here. But Barnabas doesn't focus his gaze on the church's imperfections. He doesn't just see a young, immature, fledgling, imperfect church. He sees what God is doing and the grace of God at work in their midst. His heart is like a radar, tuned to the frequency of God's grace. Whenever he sees God's grace at work, his heart rejoices and he is glad at the movement of God's grace.

He rejoices in this work even though he had not been involved in it himself. One of the tests of spiritual maturity is whether or not you can be glad in the work that God is doing, even if it wasn't your work or doesn't come to your credit. Do you rejoice whenever and wherever God's grace is at work? Or are you tempted to scorn or diminish those works that have nothing to do with you? Barnabas saw the grace of God and he was glad. He had a joyful vision.

John Piper wrote, "Some people have their heat sensors adjusted and alerted for embers of grace that they can fan into flame, while other people have their buckets of criticism ready to pour on the ashes of imperfection." What are you like? Do you have your heat sensors adjusted and alert for embers of grace? Are you looking for evidences of grace in people—evidences of grace that you can fan into flame? Or are you one who tends to notice the imperfections, flaws and problems in a church or in a person, ready to pour on a bucket of criticism wherever you see that? Barnabas looked for those embers of grace and fanned them into flame. Because of that, people were receptive of his exhortation.

I've noticed that whether it's in parenting or pastoring, if I'm ready and active to encourage someone, it's a lot easier to correct that person when they know I am for them and that I believe in what God is doing in their lives. But if I'm full of criticism, it's hard to give correction. There is a lot to criticize about God's people and I'm sure there was a lot to criticize in this church. Critics of the church are a dime a dozen—it doesn't take a lot of grace or wisdom to offer criticism. But give us people who can see the church with all her failures and still say, "I see God's grace at work there and rejoice in what God is doing!" Those will be the people whom God uses to bring about reformation and revival in the church. That's what God did through Barnabas.

Look at the end of verse 23. *“...He exhorted them all [preached] to remain faithful to the Lord with steadfast purpose...”* He’s calling them to perseverance, to go further up and in to the things of God and to remain true to the Lord. And people responded to his preaching. *“And a great many people were added to the Lord.”* There’s a great movement of God going on and Barnabas—the encourager—fans that into a flame.

#### 4. Humility

That brings us to another trait that is very pronounced in Barnabas’ life: humility. Barnabas is being used by God in this great awakening in Antioch. His preaching is being well received and many people are being added to the church.

In verse 25 Barnabas went to Tarsus to look for Saul. That’s something! This would have been the perfect opportunity for Barnabas to build a movement around himself. This would have been his opportunity to get into the limelight, but Barnabas didn’t want to be front and center. He didn’t have to be the number one go-to guy in ministry. Instead, he sees a perfect opportunity to promote the ministry of the Apostle Paul. Instead of pushing himself forward, he finds Paul and says, “I need help here and God has gifted Saul and called him. I believe God is going to use him here.” He finds, equips and brings him to begin ministering together in Antioch. And God uses them mightily.

Look at verse 26, *“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.”* His humility causes more fruit to be born in the church. Because it doesn’t have to be all about Barnabas, the work of God continues to multiply.

Now they’ve been in Antioch for about a year. Look at chapter 13. It’s time to send out missionaries from this church. In verse three, the church fasts and prays; then they lay their hands on these two men—Barnabas and Saul—to send them out for ministry. We see Barnabas’ humility on display in this chapter also. Up until now, every time these two names are mentioned together, Barnabas’ name is always first. He’s clearly the leader. We see that in verse seven.

As Barnabas and Saul come together, Barnabas is number one. Move down to verse 13 and notice what happens. *“Now Paul and his companions set sail from Paphos and came to Perga in Pamphylia.”* Now Barnabas is just one of Paul’s companions. Look down at verse 46 and notice the order. It says, *“And Paul and Barnabas spoke out boldly...”* Paul’s

name is first. From this point forward, Barnabas' name is not going to be first anymore. Paul has become the premier leader—premier pastor, preacher, missionary. Barnabas is more in a supporting role. He's gracefully fading, just like John the Baptist. “[Jesus] *must increase, but I must decrease*” (John 3:30).

When someone asked Leonard Bernstein what the hardest instrument was to play in the orchestra, he said, “The hardest instrument to play is second fiddle.” You know the little saying, “It takes more grace than I can tell to play the second fiddle well.” To be in a supporting role and not have to have all the focus on yourself, but to be a true encourager of others, you have to be happy to play second fiddle. You have to be someone who is not addicted to the praise of men and who is willing to fade into the background in order to build up another person and watch that person rise to be everything God is calling him to be; to be focused on others and not on self; to be sincerely interested in seeing others be fruitful and effective in serving the Lord. Barnabas excels as an example of such a humble person.

## 5. Patience

The last quality we see in Barnabas is an amazing amount of patience for people. Look at chapter 15:36. It's the story of the split that occurred between Paul and Barnabas. It was over a young man named John Mark who in chapters 12 and 13 had traveled with them on their missionary journeys. Along the way this young man, John Mark, lost courage, gave up, went home, shrank back and didn't continue. Quite some time later, we read in Acts 15:36,

*And after some days Paul said to Barnabas, “Let us return and visit the brothers in every city where we proclaimed the word of the Lord, and see how they are.” Now Barnabas wanted to take with them John called Mark.*

Barnabas hasn't forgotten about Mark and still believes that God can use Mark. *“But Paul thought best not to take with them one who had withdrawn from them in Pamphylia and had not gone with them to the work.”* Paul is holding to principle here. *“No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God”* (Luke 9:62). Luke never says who is right and who is wrong. It could be that both of them have a point, but *“there arose a sharp disagreement...”* (Acts 15:39). Paul and Barnabas had a huge conflict over this man, John Mark that was so bad *“...that they separated from each other. Barnabas took Mark with him and sailed away to Cyprus, but Paul chose Silas and departed, having*

*been commended by the brothers to the grace of the Lord. And he went through Syria and Cilicia, strengthening the churches.”*

We know that God used that sharp disagreement to advance the gospel. Isn't it good that the advancement of the gospel doesn't depend on us, even when we muddle things up? Even when we part ways from one another, God's gospel is going forward. It's interesting when you get to the end of Paul's life in 2 Timothy 4. He's an old man and writes, *“Luke alone is with me. Get Mark and bring him with you, for he is very useful to me for ministry.”*

At some point along the way, the Apostle Paul realized, “God is still using John Mark and he's useful to me. I need him.” But if it wouldn't have been for Barnabas' patience and willingness to believe in John Mark earlier on in his life, John Mark would not have been useful to Paul for the end of his life. Do you see what a beautiful gift encouragement is?

Let's look at one verse back in chapter 11 again to see where that gift comes from. A beautiful statement there about Barnabas takes us to the heart of his encouraging nature, the source of his comfort and consolation of the church. Acts 11:24 says, *“For he was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and of faith.”* That's the source of his encouraging nature. He was *“full of the Holy Spirit and of faith.”* His faith was fixated on Jesus Christ. He believed that God sent His Son to be his Savior, that Jesus Who was rich beyond all measure became poor so that he, through Christ's poverty might become rich.”

Barnabas was an encourager and believed that God welcomed him through His family through Jesus Christ when he was far off, so Barnabas became an advocate of others. He was aware of how profoundly gracious God was to him; how *“The steadfast love of the LORD never ceases; his mercies never come to an end”* (Lamentations 3:22).

Barnabas had an eye to find the grace of God at work in others. He was very aware of evidences of grace. He saw God's patience with him so he was patient with others. He was full of faith and as his faith fixed its gaze on Jesus Christ, the Holy Spirit filled Barnabas with the character of Jesus Himself.

As I read the Book of Acts, it seems like Barnabas was flawless—made no mistakes. But we know from Galatians 2 that even Barnabas failed. I'm not going to have you turn there, but he failed along with Peter when he stopped having fellowship with the Gentiles. When the Jews showed up, his fear got the best of him and he cut himself off from fellowship. When Paul came and saw that Barnabas and Peter stopped having fellowship, Paul rebuked them and was astonished at Barnabas' sin. He said in Galatians 2:13, *“...even*

*Barnabas was led astray by their hypocrisy.*” Barnabas, this great man—even he was just a man and was not perfect.

But there is a true and perfect Barnabas Who “makes the woeful heart to sing.” Jesus is the perfect Barnabas. There’s One Who never fails in either grace or truth—our Savior, Jesus Christ. He’s the greatest Encourager. When He walked on this earth, morning by morning God awakened Him to His Word so that Isaiah 50 says, *“I may know how to sustain with a word him who is weary.”*

That’s what Jesus is able to do for all who trust in Him. Just think of all the godly encouragement you’ve received from others and recognize that it’s just a reflection of the great Encourager—our Lord Jesus Christ. Often Jesus uses people—friends—but if your friends despise and forsake you, remember “what a friend you have in Jesus.” Remember that “in His arms He’ll take and shield you.” You will find a solace there in Him.

As we come to this communion table and receive these elements, we remember that He died for us so we might live in Him; no longer for ourselves but for His glory and the good of others. May our hearts be encouraged with hope in His grace, and may we be strengthened as 2 Thessalonians 2:17 says, *“...in every good work and word.”*

As we come to this table, ask Jesus, “Who can I encourage this week? Is there someone I can bless financially or who could use a phone call from me? Is there someone who needs a letter or a text with Scriptural encouragement? Is there someone in my life right now who I could take under my wing—maybe someone younger than me or a new believer? I could say, ‘Let’s read the Gospel of Luke together as we prepare to go through Luke, and let’s look at Jesus together.’” Is there someone you could disciple?

Most of us are not going to be known three generations from now but the impact of our lives will be seen in those we’ve encouraged. Barnabas played second fiddle but think of the men he impacted.

- Paul wrote 13 letters of the New Testament.
- John Mark wrote the Gospel of Mark.
- Luke wrote the Gospel of Luke and Acts.

Twenty-one hundred years later we’re still benefiting from these men who received encouragement from Barnabas. Think about the impact of your life and about the fruitfulness of the gift of encouragement. As we come here and partake together, ask God to make you an active encourager of His body so that the mission of the gospel can advance through us.

Let's pray.

God, we come before You now in the name of Jesus, Your Son. We thank You, Lord, that Jesus never fails to see embers of grace and to fan them into flame. We thank You, Lord, that a bruised reed you will not break; a dimly smoldering wick You will not quench. Thank You that You find us at our weakest and neediest and breathe fresh hope, life and encouragement into us continually. As we take this bread and drink of this cup and remember how You were broken so that we could be made whole, we pray, Lord, that You would strengthen our hearts with encouragement and hope in You so that we could be encouragers to others who are broken and weary today. Thank You,

Holy God, in love, became  
Perfect Man to bear my blame  
On the cross He took my sin  
By His death I live again

Holy God, in love, became  
Perfect Man to bear my blame  
On the cross He took my sin  
By His death I live again

(The Gospel Song by Drew Jones & Bob Kauflin)

Amen.

If you are trusting in the Lord Jesus Christ alone to save you from your sins, if you recognize that you have no righteousness in yourself to commend yourself to a Holy God, that Jesus has paid it all on the cross for you, and you receive that, He welcomes you to come just as you are to this table and to be strengthened by His grace. If you're not sure that you're trusting in Jesus, He invites you right now to come to Him. If you're not trusting in Christ, go to Jesus and ask Him to be your Savior and Lord. He will save you.

Let's rejoice together in the gospel!

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