

RECOGNIZING A REVIVAL

SERIES: GOD'S SERVANTS IN THE WORLD

Steve Zeisler

At various times in life most folks have heroes they look up to, build their lives around, or want to be like. The first heroes I can remember wanting to be like, as a child, were Davy Crockett and Green Lantern. After I came to Christ the first Bible character who captivated me was David, especially in his young manhood. From the first time he is introduced he is shown to be a remarkable young man of genius and passion, filled with poetry and capability and courage, which of course for a long time was hidden from most people around him, even his own family (1 Samuel 16-17). Nowadays, however, I find myself relating better to the folks in Scripture who are less remarkable.

In the book of Acts we have folks just like that. It is true that Acts is dominated by two great apostles whose life and ministry and writing have changed the world. The opening chapters are primarily the story of Peter, and the final chapters are the story of Paul. But along the way there are many individuals who are probably more like us and whose lives can serve as an encouragement to us. We've already encountered Philip, Ananias, Tabitha, and Cornelius.

In chapter 11, our text in this message, another such individual will be in the foreground: Barnabas. I hope who he was and how he did what he did can be a source of direction for us, and can perhaps stir us to be like him.

Son of Encouragement

We first encountered Barnabas in Acts 4:36-37, where we were told that his given name was Joseph and that he was from the island of Cyprus and the tribe of Levi. Just on first meeting him we discovered that he was a generous man and someone whose integrity was unquestioned. Chapter 9 brought him into the account once again in an important role. Saul, the great persecutor of the church in Jerusalem, had been converted on the way to Damascus, and then he had spent three years in Damascus and in the wilderness, finding his way as a young Christian. But he was remembered very well in Jerusalem as one who “breathed threats and murder,” who was responsible for the imprisonment and destruction of good Christian people. So when he returned to Jerusalem, the church didn't want anything to do with him. No one was buying the idea that someone like Saul the Pharisee could become Saul the brother in Christ—except for Barnabas. Barnabas could detect the presence of God when others couldn't. He recognized that Saul was in fact a follower of Jesus and that he had about him the aroma of Christ.

This was Barnabas' strength. He was good at detecting the Lord, articulating God's purposes, and understanding his ways. Barnabas was neither brilliant nor powerful. But his humility and love were used by God. He made other people great and enabled church communities to thrive. I hope we will learn from his example.

Acts 11:1-2:

Now the apostles and the brethren who were throughout Judea heard that the Gentiles also had received the word of God. And when Peter came up to Jerusalem, those who were circumcised took issue with him....

The term “those who were circumcised” probably means those who were passionate about the Christian faith as the fulfillment of the promises of Judaism. The vast majority of the believers in the church in Jerusalem were Jewish and therefore circumcised. As we'll see, they were nervous about the fact that the invitation was spreading to Gentiles. So these folks took issue with Peter. Verses 3-4:

Saying, “You went to uncircumcised men and ate with them.” But Peter began speaking and proceeded to explain to them in orderly sequence....

We'll skip verses 5-14, where Peter retells the story that we looked at already in chapter 10. In verses 15-20 he relates the events that took place in Cornelius' house.

“And as I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell upon them, just as He did upon us at the beginning. And I remembered the word of the Lord, how He used to say, ‘John baptized with water, but you shall be baptized with the Holy Spirit.’ If God therefore gave to them the same gift as He gave to us also after believing in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could stand in God’s way?” And when they heard this, they quieted down, and glorified God, saying, “Well then, God has granted to the Gentiles also the repentance that leads to life.”

So then those who were scattered because of the persecution that arose in connection with Stephen made their way to Phoenicia and Cyprus and Antioch, speaking the word to no one except to Jews alone. But there were some of them, men of Cyprus and Cyrene, who came to Antioch and began speaking to the Greeks also, preaching the Lord Jesus.

It’s hard to be sure whether the term “Greeks” refers to the Hellenists, who were Jews who spoke Greek and had a great deal of Greek culture in their lives, or the Gentile Greeks, or the shared culture of the most Grecianized Jews and the most Jewish Greeks. The last possibility is what I think is indicated here; some of those who were dispersed because of the persecution began to preach Christ to those on the very edge of Judaism, where Greeks and Jews were beginning to learn from each other and be changed by each other.

Verses 21-25:

And the hand of the Lord was with them, and a large number who believed turned to the Lord. And the news about them reached the ears of the church at Jerusalem, and they sent Barnabas off to Antioch. Then when he had come and witnessed the grace of God, he rejoiced and began to encourage them all with resolute heart to remain true to the Lord; for he was a good man, and full of the Holy Spirit and of faith. And considerable numbers were brought to the Lord. And he left for Tarsus to look for Saul....

You will remember that Saul left Jerusalem and was sent to his hometown, Tarsus, which was not far from Antioch. Verses 26-30:

And when he had found him, he brought him to Antioch. And it came about that for an entire year they met with the church, and taught considerable numbers; and the disciples were first called Christians in Antioch.

Now at this time some prophets came down from Jerusalem to Antioch. One of them named Agabus stood up and began to indicate by the Spirit that there would certainly be a great famine all over the world. And this took place in the reign of Claudius. And in the proportion that any of the disciples had means, each of them determined to send a contribution for the relief of the brethren living in Judea. And this they did, sending it in charge of Barnabas and Saul to the elders.

Cornelius and his family and friends had received Christ without any concern on the part of Peter or his companions. Peter had sat at their table, eaten their food, listened to their jokes, hugged their kids, and treated them just as if they were no different from any of his Jewish neighbors. This was alarming. So when he went back to Jerusalem he had to answer questions. And the church in Jerusalem learned something important. We’re going to consider that story, and then we’re going to look at how Barnabas, who was in Jerusalem at that time, was able to go and apply the lessons learned in Antioch.

Learning together in changing times

What happened in Jerusalem? The first thing to highlight is that Peter received this questioning without any indignation or resistance. He didn’t say, “Who do you think you are? I’m the great apostle Peter. I know better than you!” He actually legitimized the questions. It was appropriate for them to examine him on these matters. And the result finally was that the church accepted the Gentiles and gave glory to God. There was a good outcome. Of course it makes sense that Peter received the questioning without being affronted—he had had trouble with this development himself. God had to show him the vision three times, and at first he said, “No, Lord.” So he could understand why folks would find this difficult. But he expected that if God could persuade him, then God would persuade his friends. If the Lord was in this, he would make the matter sufficiently clear in the hearts of others who loved him. Peter didn’t assume that a difference of opinion was an indication of bad attitudes.

Let me make a couple of observations. First, when Peter told his story, he just said what happened. He didn’t get

emotional or embellish the tale so they would finally get it. He wisely understood that if God were going to make himself known, then an honest, straightforward telling of the facts would be the best way. He expected that his friends would hear the instruction of the Spirit in what he said.

It's important to note that Peter applied the words of Jesus to the event. He said, "And I remembered the word of the Lord, how He used to say, 'John baptized with water, but you shall be baptized with the Holy Spirit.'" When events surprise us and we don't understand what's happening, or we don't agree with what someone says, we go back to Scripture, to the promises of God in Christ and wisdom that he granted us, and we see if this new idea fits with what we know otherwise from the Lord.

How can we apply what we observe here in Jerusalem? For one thing, it's okay to be uncertain. People who claim to have had visions may not have had them. There are false claims of hearing God's voice. Every cult in modern times is generally based on some claim that God is acting when he is not. Peter's questioners were right to be a little concerned about his familiarity with Gentiles, because sometimes close friendship with those who do not believe and who serve idols doesn't change them, it changes us. It's okay to ask people, "Are you sure you can handle what you are going into? Are you sure you are going to be the influencer instead of the one who is influenced?" The history of Israel is replete with stories of the Jews' embracing the pagan world around them, becoming pagans themselves, and being judged for it.

In fact, it is inevitable that churches will have hard discussions, different opinions, struggles to understand, and wrestling over issues. I can think of only two reasons that these things wouldn't happen. One is if the church becomes so irrelevant that God doesn't do anything new. Its "lampstand" is removed (Revelation 2:4-5) because it is useless. It has lost any responsiveness to God, so that the winds of the Spirit never blow, God never asks new questions, new folks never come, and misunderstandings never occur, because nothing ever changes.

The other reason is if one person is chosen to be in charge. Churches can be made to get along if somebody in charge is autocratic and dominant, the sole interpreter of God's word and will and movement and thinking. But that church will die as well, because leadership in the body of Christ is meant to be shared among folks with different spiritual gifts, from different generations, from both genders, from different ethnic backgrounds and with different first languages.

So if we are going to live out church as the New Testament describes it, we are going to have trouble getting along with each other. People are going to ask hard questions. "What were you thinking? Why would you read that in this text? Do you really believe that? You didn't used to be that way—what's changed?" We're going to need to talk and answer the questions. Sometimes we'll heed warnings, and sometimes we'll start a new adventure without knowing what's going to happen, but we'll find out together.

I'm reminded of the title of a book I saw some years ago: *The Seven Last Words of the Church: "We've Never Done it That Way Before"* (by Ralph Neighbors, Jr.). We can ask ourselves questions based on Peter's experience in Jerusalem: "Do these folks love the same Lord I do? Are they listening to him? Do I really think I'm the only one who is serious about my faith? Do I have something to learn?" If I can credit them with genuine faith, then I need to hear their objections, receive their warnings, listen to their point of view.

The irrepressible message

Beginning in verse 19 Luke tells the story of dispersion. There is a fairly clear time frame to this that Luke has actually compressed in his telling, but we know it from other texts, especially Paul's writing in Galatians. We saw in chapter 8 that when Stephen was martyred, Christians began leaving Jerusalem under persecution, especially those who had come from other places they could go back to. Brand-new Christians were being dispersed across the map. They went to Samaria and Caesarea on the coast. Now in chapter 11 we observe that they went farther north to Phoenicia and Antioch. They went to Cyrene, which is in northern Africa, and the island of Cyprus. And the gospel went with them. This happened over a period of about ten years. Eventually the gospel not only expanded geographically, but it got nearer and nearer to the edge of Judaism, where the Greeks and the Grecianized Jews were very close to each other. As the gospel spilled over and new folks were coming into the church, there was a

marvelous revival in Antioch, one of the great cities of the Roman Empire. The church in Jerusalem realized that it would be good to send experienced leadership to help out. So they sent Barnabas, who was the ideal person for the job.

Let me make a couple of observations here. First of all, it is the nature of the gospel to break barriers and expand. Remember Paul's powerful insistence in Romans: "For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes..." (Romans 1:16). The gospel, being the very power of God, will not be contained. It is explosive in its nature. If you are captured by the gospel as a Christian, if you are given stewardship of the gospel to give it away, you cannot sit on it. It won't permit itself to be put under a bucket or hidden away in a desk drawer. The gospel has a quality of glory and power, and it pushes itself into new places geographically and culturally. It persuades people who have never heard it before. Persecution succeeded only in spreading the gospel farther; if Christians are hammered for their faith, God just sends them abroad to new places with new opportunities. If someone sets up barriers, the gospel knocks them down. If there are divisions between people as there was between Jews and Greeks, the gospel goes to the very point of that tension and begins to reach out and build bridges across the chasm. It persuades people who are not like any of the people already on the inside. The gospel is born by unnamed, ordinary folks with ease. Nobody's name is given when it says they went to Phoenicia and Cyprus and Antioch and Cyrene. But change was accomplished and churches were started and faith grew.

Seeing what God is doing

So Barnabas came to Antioch where the church was thriving, growing beautifully, filled with enthusiastic Christians from all backgrounds. He had been in Jerusalem listening to the debate over the Gentiles and finally glorifying God with the rest of the church, and he came not to criticize, assuming the worst, but to help. Who Barnabas was and how he acted should encourage us.

Verse 24 gives us a description of Barnabas: "For he was a good man, and full of the Holy Spirit and of faith." You will spend a long time trying to find a more desirable description than this. There is more than one Greek word that is translated "good" in English. This is the one that means beautiful. It doesn't mean just being good in a technical sense, or meeting a standard. It doesn't even mean being pure. This word means being winsome, attractive. It's goodness that warms your heart. Barnabas was a beautiful guy, in the vernacular. He was full of the Holy Spirit, and he was deep in his faith.

When Barnabas came to Antioch, the first thing he did was rejoice to see what God was doing. Now, of course there were problems. These people had a lot to learn. They were young and probably out of control in some areas. Things were happening too fast, and the leadership needed to be developed, and structures needed to be put in place. There was much that needed to be done. But he thanked God and rejoiced with them, shared their excitement and communicated his joy to them. Then, true to his name, he began to encourage them, to urge them to grow, "with a resolute heart." He urged them to remain true to the Lord—to get grounded, to make the hard choices that new Christians have to make, learning to pray, learning to say no to temptation, joining with other people, and discovering their gifts.

Whatever the process was, Barnabas began in earnest to offer what he had learned over the years that he walked with the Lord as part of the church in Jerusalem. Then, realizing that the job was too much for one man, or perhaps even realizing he didn't have the necessary gifts, he went and found Saul, who would be perhaps the greatest Bible teacher and the most profound Christian thinker of all time, although he had not attained that yet. But Barnabas brought him in as a Bible teacher, and the two of them began to instruct the church together. Hundreds were coming to the Lord. New life was springing up, and the church was being instructed and growing, taking the Scriptures seriously. Antioch, we'll see increasingly, was becoming the second great city of Christian learning and missions in the New Testament era, the first being Jerusalem. Barnabas was there encouraging folks, and his gathering Saul in to help him demonstrated that he had enough humility to know that he didn't have all the gifts, that there were things that other people could do better. He had no ego that needed to be stroked. He just wanted people to benefit from God's truth.

Two final things happened in Antioch. It says believers were called Christians for the first time. This was a derisive term. The sophisticated people of that city made fun of these people who spoke so much of Jesus, calling them

“Christ-ones.” The old term from the sixties and seventies, “Jesus freaks,” comes to mind. It was that kind of term. They were being laughed at. But whenever someone insults you for being too much identified with Christ and looks down on you as unsophisticated and embarrassing, take it as a compliment!

The second thing that happened is that the church in Antioch gave back material benefits to the church in Jerusalem in Judea that had given them spiritual benefits. There was mutual blessing. That will always be characteristic of the way God works. Recipients give back to those from whom they have received.

Churches that never have any difficulty, in which there is no tension or struggle to understand what God is doing, are churches to avoid. If the wind of the Spirit is blowing among us, and sometimes blowing hard, it’s going to mean that new, unforeseen things, new ways of expression, and difficulty in understanding one another are going to happen. The way to proceed is to see what God is up to, to listen carefully with humility and the expectation that we are all going to get it, with the assumption that other folks love the Lord as much as we do and they listen as thoroughly as we do. As we assume the best, we will learn to grow from each other and bless one another and find a way forward together. Barnabas’ selfless capacity to see and promote the best in other people is what makes him such a good example.

Do you remember what Jesus said about those who would see God in other people and in the world? It wasn’t “Blessed are the geniuses, for they shall see God.” It wasn’t “Blessed are the dynamic.” It wasn’t “Blessed are the folks with the most going for them.” It was “Bless are the pure in heart, for they shall see God” (Matthew 5:8). Barnabas was that kind of a man, and we too have that option.

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Steve Zeisler
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