

Building People like Barnabas

Acts 11:19-23

As the news spread among the believers, they were horrified. The stoning of Stephen caused them to clearly understand: there were those who hated the Gospel of Christ. Saul's threats of slaughter only put the exclamation point on the reality of that hatred.

So the Christians fled from the area. The term "diaspora" has been watered down over the years to mean any large migration of a national people to another country. But the term originally referred to "the involuntary mass dispersion of a population."^[i] The Jewish people were all too familiar with such "involuntary mass dispersion." And now it was happening again – at the hands of their own people!

Verse 19 of our text helps us to understand why James opened his letter with these words, "to the twelve tribes which are scattered abroad, greetings." And Peter began his first letter with the salutation, "to the strangers scattered throughout Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia . . ." It was because the believers "were scattered abroad upon the persecution that arose about Stephen . . ."

Against the backdrop of this persecution, they were faced with a choice. Would they be intimidated into passive silence? Or would they build people with their words? We are faced with the same choices. In today's text, we will see that we could build people like Barnabas.

Boldly Building on the Foundation of Faith in the Gospel

How would you [prepare for hard times?](#)^[ii] It is clear from this passage that people were trusting the Lord. And they trusted the Lord enough to know that He had been preparing them for what was ahead.

Verse 19 does not say that the believers were scattered and became silent. No, these people had seen the pattern of powerful prayer in Acts 4:13-31. They were bold because they believed. And so they were "preaching the Word" wherever they were scattered.

The title of this message is "Building People like Barnabas," but that title raises a few questions. Does it mean that we build people who become like Barnabas, the son of encouragement? Yes! Does it mean that we build people in the same manner in which Barnabas built people? Yes! Well, is it even possible that we could be like Barnabas? Yes, as we shall see, the same Holy Spirit was at work in him that is at work in us. And the Holy Spirit was at work in these bold believers who spread out from Jerusalem. Across the centuries, God has used persecution and pressures to stir up His people to preach the Word. If we are to build people like Barnabas, we must build on a Gospel foundation.

Following the strategy of Jesus and those early apostles, they preached Christ in the synagogues across the region. But they also remembered how Jesus had spoken to the Gentiles. After all, Jesus had said about the centurion who met Him at Capernaum, "Truly I say unto you, I have not

found so great faith, no not in Israel” (Matthew 8:5-13). And to the woman of Canaan who met Jesus near Tyre and Sidon, Jesus had said, “O woman, great is your faith!” (Matthew 15:21-28). So, verses 20-21 record that **“some of them were men of Cyprus and Cyrene, which, when they were come to Antioch, spoke unto the Grecians, preaching the Lord Jesus. And the hand of the Lord was with them: and a great number believed, and turned unto the Lord.”**

Throughout the Old and New Testaments, we have learned that this message has transformed lives. Just a few verses earlier in Acts 11, we can see how important it was for God’s people to share that message.

When Peter was telling the other apostles about a series of remarkable events, he made this point clear. Cornelius, a centurion at Caesarea, began to seek the Lord. When you and I see someone who is seeking the Lord, we know that the Lord is at work. Why? Romans 3:11 tells us that “there is no one who understands, there is no one who seeks after God.” When you do see someone who is seeking after God and comes to know the Lord, you know that the Lord is at work (John 6:44). When an angel appeared to Cornelius at Caesarea, he told him to send for Peter, who was at Joppa (Acts 10). The angel had specifically told Cornelius that Peter would share an important message with him (Acts 10:22, 32-33). So Peter preached “peace by Jesus Christ (He is Lord of all)!” (Acts 10:36). In Acts 11, we learn that when Peter returned to Jerusalem, he shared the details of this remarkable series of events. And here is what the angel told Cornelius about Peter: He “shall tell thee words, whereby thou and all thy house shall be saved” (Acts 11:14).

This is the importance of knowing “the Word!” This is the importance of sharing God’s Gospel message. Christ died for the sins of mankind; He was buried for three days; He gloriously rose again from the grave. He proved the point behind all His preaching. He alone can transform sinful people who living meaningless lives, trying to avoid thoughts of death. To build people, you must be prepared the share the Gospel in a Spirit-filled manner. This is foundational. Are you prepared to share the Gospel? And are you prepared for His hand to take hold of you and use you? If so, then you are ready to boldly build on the foundation of faith in the Gospel. You could build people like Barnabas.

Build on Your Background, like Barnabas

Down through history, God has enabled His people to understand their times and what they should do. This was true of the men of Issachar according to 1 Chronicles 12:32. They understood the times and knew what Israel should do. God prepares His people by giving them specific backgrounds and experiences. And then, when the time is right, each will know what he is to do. In the words of Esther 4:14, each will ask himself or herself, **“who knows whether you are come to the kingdom for such a time as this?”** Servant-leaders like Barnabas understand this. They recognize that God has prepared their backgrounds in order to prepare them for specific assignments. In Acts 4:36, we learned that Barnabas was from Cyprus. The northeast peninsula of Cyprus is about 100 miles southwest of Antioch. (Cyprus is 85 miles off the coast of Syria.) According to Acts 11:20, men from Cyprus were among those who fled from Jerusalem and evangelized Antioch. It is certainly possible that Barnabas knew some of these people. He

certainly would have understood the customs of the region, and may have visited Antioch in his youth.

In any case, to the leaders at Jerusalem, Barnabas was the obvious choice to examine the events at Antioch. God had providentially given him the background he needed to take on this task. For when the **“tidings of these things came unto the ears of the church which was in Jerusalem: and they sent forth Barnabas that he should go as far as Antioch.”** Barnabas was the right person with the right background in the right place at the right time. God could use your background and training in the same way. Would you be willing to build people like Barnabas? How would you apply this to your background? Your God-given background can be a blessing to others as you allow the Lord to use you. Give yourself to Him as a living sacrifice (Romans 12:1-2), and watch the ways that He will use you. The Lord could use you as a “son of consolation” and lead you into the greatest adventures you have ever known. Are you ready to build on your background, like Barnabas? God has a purpose for your life, and your greatest fulfillment will come in finding that purpose. You could be building people like Barnabas.

Antioch (modern day Antakya) was the third largest city in the Roman Empire (behind Rome and Alexandria). It was called “the metropolis of the East.” Between half a million and three-quarters of a million people lived in Antioch at that time. The city was situated on the Orontes River which was navigable for the fifteen miles to the Mediterranean. A man named Nicolas from Antioch was one of the original deacons at the church in Jerusalem (Acts 6:5). Antioch was a sensuous, pornographic city. Referring to its moral pollution, it was said that “the filth of the Orontes” invaded Rome.^[iii] But the most pornographic society cannot withstand the Spirit-filled proclamation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. As our own society grows more sensuous and pornographic, this is an important point to remember.

Being Perceptive like Barnabas

One could well imagine that the paganism in Antioch was quite a shock to Barnabas. Since his hometown was in Cyprus, perhaps he was well acquainted with Antioch. But those wicked surroundings would have been quite different from Jerusalem. Yet we learn about him in verse 23:

“Who, when he came, and had seen the grace of God, was glad, and exhorted them all, that with purpose of heart they would cleave unto the Lord.

Acts 11:23 may be the most quintessential verse in Scripture to describe Barnabas, “the son of consolation.” “Quintessential” in the sense that it represents a typical example of the life and ministry of Barnabas.

- In spite of ethnic differences

Barnabas was a Jew who was willing to go into the Hellenistic (Greek) culture of Antioch. To be genuine “sons of comfort” you and I must be willing to reach out to those who are very different from us.

- In a pagan setting

The people of Antioch had little to no knowledge of the Old Testament. Barnabas came from a background that was steeped in learning the ways of the true God. Those new believers at Antioch undoubtedly acted very differently from the seasoned saints at Jerusalem. Yet notice what Barnabas saw: he saw the grace of God! What would that look like to you? How would you recognize the grace of God at work in the lives of people?

- Seeing the Gospel of the grace of God (Acts 20:24, Ephesians 2:8-9)

They may not have known much, but they knew about Jesus. Their lives had been radically changed by God's good news. They knew "whom they had believed" (2 Timothy 1:12). If you are looking for the grace of God, look for people who are making much of the Gospel of God's grace.

- Seeing spiritual gifts (Romans 12:6, Ephesians 4:7, 1 Peter 4:10)

The Gospel of grace does not make "cookie-cutter Christians." No indeed, the Spirit of God produces unity, but not necessarily uniformity (where everyone is uniformly the same). Even among those new believers, Barnabas could undoubtedly see the gifts of the Spirit already at work. As you watch a congregation of believers, you can observe the gifts of grace (Romans 12:5-8). Watch how they use these gifts graciously to build the unity of the body of Christ. Seeing God's grace in the way they gave (2 Corinthians 8:1-9)

Seeing God's grace in the way they endured trials (2 Corinthians 12:9, 1 Peter 5:10)

Seeing God's grace in the way they worshiped together (Colossians 3:16)

Seeing their good hope through grace (2 Thessalonians 2:16)

Seeing the way they separated themselves from the sensuous, lustful culture (Titus 2:11-12, Jude 4)

Seeing the way they prayed together (Hebrews 4:16)

Seeing their attitudes in the way they treated each other (James 4:6, Hebrews 12:15, 1 Peter 5:5)

Seeing the way that each husband treated his wife (1 Peter 3:7)

Seeing the way they spoke to each other (Ephesians 4:29, Colossians 4:6)

Barnabas perceived the grace of God in the lives of people. And Barnabas built upon it.

Being an Encourager, like Barnabas

Barnabas “was glad and exhorted them all, that with purpose of heart they would cleave unto the Lord.” How would we build people like Barnabas?

- **His spirit**

He was truly a “son of encouragement.” When he arrived in Antioch, Barnabas did not use a critical, nitpicking approach. Yes, he had been sent by the church at Jerusalem to carefully examine what was happening at Antioch. But Barnabas, the builder, the perceptive preacher, was glad when he saw the grace of God. In your mind’s eye, can you see how the smile of Barnabas was a blessing to the saints at Antioch? Ecclesiastes 8:1 says that “the wisdom of a man makes his face shine.” Just imagine how glad the believers were when they saw that they caused Barnabas to be glad and rejoice. Would people say about you that you are “ever the critic?” Or would they say that you are a caring encourager? Are you glad when you see the grace of God at work? With gladness, you could build people like Barnabas.

- **His approach**

Barnabas was an exhorter. The “son of encouragement” came alongside those new believers and helped them to take the next spiritual steps. Could you and I be encouragers like Barnabas? Consider the words of Hebrews 3:13-14: **“But exhort one another daily, while it is called Today; lest any of you be hardened through the deceitfulness of sin. For we are made partakers of Christ, if we hold the beginning of our confidence steadfast unto the end;”** We could be like Barnabas; we could encourage and exhort one another daily. We could do so to help others avoid being hardened by sin in all its deceitfulness. We could encourage each other to keep holding on to our confidence in Christ. Let’s follow the example of Barnabas and encourage others **“that with purpose of heart they would cleave unto the Lord.”** Let’s build people like Barnabas.

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[i] Diaspora, Wikipedia, accessed at <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Diaspora>

[ii] In an earlier message from this text, we raised the issue of how to prepare for hard times. The church at Antioch gives us a clear pattern as to how to prepare ourselves and others for the dangerous times ahead. Accessed at <https://www.cbcfindlay.org/how-to-prepare-for-hard-times/>

[iii] The Foundation of the Church at Antioch, Origins of Christianity, Book II, accessed at <https://ccel.org/ccel/renan/apostles/apostles.xv.html>