



Encouragement: *A Commentary on Acts 11: 19-26*

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Barnabas, “the son of encouragement,” is identified as the person sent by the church in Jerusalem to establish a relationship with the converts in Antioch (Acts 4:36; 11:22). Thus Barnabas demonstrates two of the characteristics of God that are revealed by the work of the church: encouragement and outreach.

The church is intended to reflect the love of God as revealed in Jesus Christ and to extend this Gospel (“good news”) throughout the world. Without God’s *love*, there is no message, only prideful meddling. Without the *vision* for outreach there is no motive, only selfish narrowness.

Barnabas was sent. He did not decide to undertake the task in Antioch on his own. He moved across cultural lines and he likely had to deal with language barriers in order to become a partner with the new Christians in Antioch.

As soon as he moved in as a participant in the church in Antioch, he could see that the reports which had been heard in Jerusalem were true. That there was in this city a sincere body of believers was quickly verified. Thus encouraged, Barnabas moved onward to the city of Tarsus in order to invite Saul, later called Paul the apostle, to join him in this new work helping the church in Antioch (Acts 11:22-26). The one who encourages first discerns whether indeed it is God who is energizing the changes, and next, brings others to help in the work. The encourager rarely works alone. Others are invited. Resources and assignments are shared. Then the encourager and companions become partners with those to whom they have been sent. This pattern is important even today for those who carry out assistance and development work.

What can we learn from Barnabas? As in so much of the Bible, the story is told in few words. Acts 11:19-26 gives a straightforward review of the event. The reader is given just enough of the facts to be able to put together in the mind’s eye a moving picture, complete with plot and drama. Luke, the writer of the Acts, selects details carefully so that the story can be unpacked by any serious Bible reader.

Barnabas must have been respected and valued for his capacity to bring others into the action. Those who knew him thought of him as an encourager. His nickname, “son of encouragement,” was a sincere tribute. Thus we can imagine how disappointed he was when the skittish church-members in Jerusalem were unwilling to take a chance on Saul after his conversion on the road to Damascus. Saul of Tarsus had been a vicious enemy of the Christians. After he was confronted by the experience with Jesus that led to his startling conversion, he was still mistrusted because of the danger he represented. The church in Jerusalem didn’t know what to do with him, and so they recommended that he return home to Tarsus. Perhaps they hoped that their risk would be less if Saul were farther away. Or maybe they thought that several years of maturing as a Christian would make Saul see things more cautiously. Barnabas was right there in Jerusalem during this discussion and controversy. Obviously, he was out-voted. But encouragers don’t give up! Just as soon as he saw the importance of the work in Antioch, Barnabas brought Saul into the action. Thus the encourager, Barnabas, launched Saul—Paul the

apostle—as he began his pioneering career as the great example of Christian outreach and vision (Acts 9:26-31; 13:1-52).

What can we learn about other encouragers? Throughout the Bible encouragement is demonstrated and expected as a character trait of believers. God encourages us individually and as members of his body. God encourages his people to encourage others. Many a story in the Bible comes out differently because an encourager intervened at just the right time. Godly encouragement is not motivated by fear and a quest for the safe and easy way out. It is an outcome of generous goodwill for others, as Jesus taught.

Reading the Bible provides encouragement. Especially as we ask God to reveal himself to us through our study of the Scriptures, a focus on the encouragement that uplifts and inspires godly risk-taking becomes our source of spiritual strength. For a start, consider the way that God's voice influenced Abraham, Joseph, Moses, Joshua, Jonathan, Daniel, Naomi, Elizabeth, Peter, John, Paul, and Jesus.

Following is a short list of texts for encouragers. Study of the circumstances of each of these passages could provide many valuable experiences in Bible study. In turn, these studies could lead to plans and outlines for several encouraging devotional talks: [Num. 6:22-27] [1 Sam. 19:1-7] [1 Kings 8:54-61] [1Chron. 16:1-36] [Psalm 23:1-6] [Acts 14:22] [Acts 20:1,2] [Acts 28:15] [Romans 12:8] [Colossians 4:7, 8] [1 Thess. 2:10-12] [Heb. 13:20,21] [Eph. 3:14-21].