



CLOUD OF WITNESSES

# BARNABAS

*Man for Others*

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# *Introduction*

**Alive in the Word** brings you resources to deepen your understanding of Scripture, offer meaning for your life today, and help you to pray and act in response to God's word.

Use any volume of **Alive in the Word** in the way best suited to you.

- **For individual learning and reflection**, consider this an invitation to prayerfully journal in response to the questions you find along the way. And be prepared to move from head to heart and then to action.
- **For group learning and reflection**, arrange for three sessions where you will use the material provided as the basis for faith sharing and prayer. You may ask group members to read each chapter in advance and come prepared with questions answered. In this kind of session, plan to be together for about an hour. Or, if your group prefers, read and respond to the questions together without advance preparation. With this approach, it's helpful to plan on spending more time for each group session in order to adequately work through each of the chapters.

- **For a parish-wide event** or use within a larger group, provide each person with a copy of this volume, and allow time during the day for quiet reading, group discussion and prayer, and then a final commitment by each person to some simple action in response to what he or she learned.

This volume on the topic of Barnabas is one of several volumes dedicated to **Cloud of Witnesses**. The pages of our Bibles are filled with the stories of women and men who have played a unique role in salvation history. By entering into a few key biblical passages written by or describing these people, we begin to see how our own story continues God's great work of salvation in the world. Their witness, handed on to us from centuries ago, continues to speak to us and challenge us to stand as faithful witnesses in today's world.

## *Barnabas and Saul: The Beginning*



*Begin by asking God to assist you in your prayer and study. Then slowly read through a brief passage from Acts 9, which describes the first encounter between Barnabas and Saul.*

### **Acts 9:26-30**

**<sup>26</sup>When [Saul] arrived in Jerusalem he tried to join the disciples, but they were all afraid of him, not believing that he was a disciple. <sup>27</sup>Then Barnabas took charge of him and brought him to the apostles, and he reported to them how on the way he had seen the Lord and that he had spoken to him, and how in Damascus he had spoken out boldly in the name of Jesus. <sup>28</sup>He moved about freely with them in Jerusalem, and spoke out boldly in the name of Jesus. <sup>29</sup>He also spoke and debated with the Hellenists, but they tried to kill him. <sup>30</sup>And when the brothers learned of this, they took him down to Caesarea and sent him on his way to Tarsus.**

*After a few moments of quiet reflection on the scene described in Acts 9, consider the following background information provided in Setting the Scene. The occasional questions in the margins may be used for your own reflection and/or for group discussion.*

## *Setting the Scene*

Saul and Barnabas come together in the narrative of the Acts of the Apostles here for the first time, but we have been introduced to them before. We met Barnabas first, when he was presented as a model member of the Christian community in Jerusalem, having sold his property and given the money to the apostles to help the needy (Acts 4:36-37). We also learned that his given name was Joseph, and that Barnabas was an Aramaic nickname given to him by the apostles, rendered in Greek as “son of encouragement” or “son of consolation.” He was a native of the island of Cyprus and a member of a Jewish Levite family. Besides the identity revealed in his nickname, we learn that he is a Hellenist Christian (one born and raised in a Greek-speaking community outside of Israel), that he is therefore considered an immigrant (potentially an outsider) in Jerusalem, and that he was raised in an observant Jewish family, probably speaking Hebrew at home. All of this will have significance as the story in Acts unfolds.

One of Luke’s favorite words in his gospel and in the Acts of the Apostles is the Greek *dei*, “it is (or was) necessary,” in the sense of divine destiny or providence: “Did you not know that

How does the meaning of the name “Barnabas” create expectations about the plot of the story?

I must be [*dei*] in my Father's house?" (Luke 2:49); "the Son of Man must be [*dei*] handed over to sinners and be crucified" (24:7); "Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and enter into his glory?" (24:26); "It is necessary for us to undergo many hardships to enter the kingdom of God" (Acts 14:22); "the Messiah had to [*dei*] suffer and rise from the dead" (17:3). In his introduction of Barnabas, Luke implies divine providence at work, for already from his birth the young man is being prepared for the special role he will play in the development of the Christian church.

Our first notice of Saul was as a young man who witnessed the stoning of Stephen with approval (Acts 7:58; 8:1). The next we heard of him he was "breathing murderous threats against the disciples of the Lord" and seeking authorization to persecute Christians in Damascus (9:1-2). On the way there, he had the momentous revelation of Jesus Christ that turned him from a persecutor to an avid disciple, and heard the voice from heaven asking, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?" (9:4). Of this experience he later wrote to the Galatians, "[God], who from my mother's womb had set me apart and called me through his grace, was pleased to reveal his Son to me, so that I might proclaim him to the Gentiles" (Gal 1:15-16). Instead of entering Damascus as a persecutor, he came as a Christian preacher proclaiming that Jesus is the Son of God and the Messiah, but he spoke in such a fiery and challenging way that he aroused the hostility of the Jews, who conspired to kill him.



When we meet him in the present episode with Barnabas, Saul has just had a daring escape from Damascus, having been lowered through an opening in the city wall in a basket by his friends (Acts 9:25). The apostle himself later writes about this in 2 Corinthians, specifying that it was the local ruler, the governor under King Aretas (11:32), who ordered the city sealed to prevent his escape. This information permits us, with the help of extra-biblical sources, to date the escape and Saul's arrival in Jerusalem to the year 38 or 39.

Saul, like Barnabas, had been providentially prepared for the role he would play in the Gentile mission. He was also a Hellenist, born in Tarsus in Asia Minor (modern Turkey), and raised in a devout Jewish family who sent him to Jerusalem to study as early as age twelve under Rabbi Gamaliel (Acts 22:3). Thus, he was at home in both Hebrew and Greek cultures and was, in addition, well-trained in Jewish Scripture and theology.

*Acts 9:26-30 will be explored a few verses at a time to deepen your understanding and appreciation.*

### *Understanding the Scene Itself*

<sup>26</sup>When [Saul] arrived in Jerusalem he tried to join the disciples, but they were all afraid of him, not believing that he was a disciple. <sup>27</sup>Then Barnabas took charge of him and brought him to the

apostles, and he reported to them how on the way he had seen the Lord and that he had spoken to him, and how in Damascus he had spoken out boldly in the name of Jesus.

It is understandable that the disciples in Jerusalem would have been suspicious of Saul's intentions. They had known him only as the arch persecutor who had approved of Stephen's martyrdom, the event that sparked the flight of Greek-speaking Christians from Jerusalem (Acts 8:1), and they had seen him depart for Damascus on a mission to arrest Christians and bring them back in chains (9:2). Now they are expected to embrace him as a brother. They feared that he might be an infiltrator posing as a Christian who could get them arrested or killed.

When has someone's reputation prevented you from trusting or taking seriously their message?

Barnabas takes the initiative, which will eventually, though not immediately, bring Saul into the forefront of the Christian mission to the Gentiles and, along with his letters in the New Testament, have a lasting impact on the history of the church. He "takes charge" of Saul and introduces him to the leadership of the Jerusalem church, giving him a chance to tell his story and to be accepted into the community and begin preaching in the name of Jesus.

We begin to understand in this episode why Barnabas made such an impression as a helper and promoter of others that the Hebrew leaders named him the "son of encouragement." Like Simon who became Peter, Joseph of Cyprus would become so identified by his reputation as "Barnabas the encourager" that his given name

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## “son of encouragement”

was virtually forgotten (see 1 Cor 9:6; Gal 2:1, 9, 13; Col 4:10). That he is still remembered this way without any demurrals long after his death attests to the genuineness and consistency of his reputation. Here he goes out of his way at some personal risk to come to the aid of the dangerous Saul so that he will have a chance to prove himself to the apostles.

Any member of the Jerusalem community would have been at risk in promoting Saul, a still unknown (and potentially explosive) quantity, but there were added dimensions to the risk for Barnabas, who had more to lose in worldly terms. Barnabas was the only “outsider” in the core group of leaders in the Jerusalem community. All of the rest of the Jerusalem leaders we know by name in Acts—Peter, John, James his brother and James the “brother of the Lord,” Judas Barsabbas, and Silas—were natives of Israel, but Barnabas was from Greek-speaking Cyprus. He was apparently completely bilingual, having been brought up in the Greek culture but in a fervent Hebrew-speaking Jewish family, but it would have been extremely rare and unlikely

In what ways does an “outsider” status sometimes benefit a situation and sometimes not?

for one of his background to become so trusted and embedded in the Jerusalem leadership. It is a sign of the trust placed in him by the Hebrew leadership that they would accept Saul into fellowship simply at Barnabas' word.

We know from several references in the early chapters of Acts that there was a natural division between Hebrew-speaking Christians and Greek-speaking Christians. Earlier in the story, “the Hellenists complained against the Hebrews because their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution” (Acts 6:1). This was apparently an oversight quickly remedied by the Hebrew-speaking leaders. As is often the case, the immigrant men learned the local language first because of their work in public, but the women typically stayed at home and often had no need to speak the new language. When their husbands died, this left them isolated and unable to get the help they needed without the intervention of others. They didn't know where to turn.

We know that the Jewish community viewed the Hebrew and Greek Christians as two different groups, because in the wake of the martyrdom of the Hellenist Stephen, it was only the Greek-speaking Christians who were forced to flee Jerusalem. It is striking that Barnabas was able to remain, an indication of how strongly he was identified with the Hebrew leadership inside and outside the community.

For Barnabas to take a chance on Saul was also to risk his own reputation and his enviable position in the heart of the Jerusalem Church. There is no indication that this danger entered

When have you seen Christians treat one another differently because of their cultural or ethnic backgrounds?

Barnabas' mind; this is the first of several instances when he seemed to have given no thought for his own benefit but only for the good of others and the church.

**<sup>28</sup>He moved about freely with them in Jerusalem, and spoke out boldly in the name of Jesus. <sup>29</sup>He also spoke and debated with the Hellenists, but they tried to kill him. <sup>30</sup>And when the brothers learned of this, they took him down to Caesarea and sent him on his way to Tarsus.**

Just as he had in Damascus, Saul “spoke out boldly” in the name of the Lord in Jerusalem. And just as before, his boldness got him into trouble. This would not be the last time. Saul was not known for diplomacy. When later during the successful preaching mission at Antioch in Pisidia (Acts 13:13-43) his activity aroused the hostility of a group of Jews there, he did not dialogue with them, but told them that they were rejecting the word of God and condemning

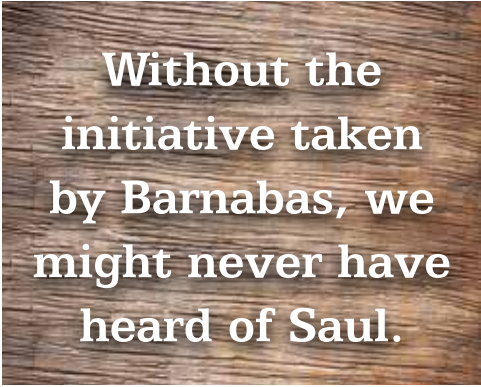


themselves as unworthy of eternal life (13:46). Not surprisingly, this caused his listeners to incite a persecution against him and Barnabas, and they were expelled from the territory (13:50). Later, some of the offended party would follow them to Lystra and stone Saul, leaving him for dead (14:19).

We should not be startled, then, knowing this would happen in the future and remembering the experience that forced his escape from Damascus, that his abrasive language aroused the hostility of the Hellenists in Jerusalem (meaning here the Jews who had moved to Israel from Greek-speaking countries). Like Barnabas, Saul was a Hellenist himself, having grown up in Tarsus in Asia Minor (modern Turkey), and was also apparently completely bilingual. It was probably particularly galling to these Jews that one of their own was speaking so forcefully about Jesus as the Messiah. We can imagine a shouting match rather than a calm exchange of ideas. At any rate, Saul's preaching had the same effect as it had in Damascus, inspiring not conversion but a desire to kill him.

The Christian leaders had already had enough to deal with in the earlier persecution because of Stephen and they could not afford to have Saul raise the heat again. As much as they might have recognized his strong faith and his preaching ability, for the sake of the mission at this time they had to send him on his way. They took him to the seaport of Caesarea and put him on a boat for Tarsus, his hometown. They probably did not expect to see him again.

Can you recall any instances when the style of delivery of a message overshadowed the message itself? Is there some wisdom here about one's tone and demeanor?



Without the  
initiative taken  
by Barnabas, we  
might never have  
heard of Saul.

There is a certain ironic humor in the very next sentence in Luke's account after Saul's departure: "The church throughout all Judea, Galilee, and Samaria was at peace" (Acts 9:31). We will not hear of Saul again until Barnabas goes to Tarsus to retrieve him years later. Without Barnabas' initiative, we might never have heard of Saul. He had apparently settled down in Tarsus to his trade, sewing together the hides of goats for making tents (Acts 18:3). It is unlikely that he remained silent about Jesus during this time, though we have no information about a preaching mission in Tarsus.

### *Praying the Word / Sacred Reading*

*If you had been in the area of Damascus or Jerusalem after Saul's conversion, would you have been leery of trusting him? Would it have made a difference to have the testimony of a trusted leader like Barnabas?*

Use your people, Lord, to lead us in your direction.

Send us as witnesses who have experienced your love and truth and beauty.

This week we pray in thanksgiving for others who speak on your behalf, especially \_\_\_\_\_ [provide names].

When opportunities arise, help each of us to speak convincingly and sincerely of your work in our lives.

### *Living the Word*

*Consider the official and unofficial leaders within your own faith community. Does their witness, invitation, and/or encouragement tend to draw you to participate in an event or project or faith formation opportunity? Take time soon to thank these people for being encouraging leaders.*

*Ask God to provide you with opportunities to speak up for others too.*