

# BARNABAS - THE SON OF ENCOURAGEMENT

**Scripture References:** Acts 4:36-37; 9:26-27; 11:19-26; 13:1-3; 15:36-41

## **The Name That Defined Him**

His real name was Joseph. But the apostles gave him a new name: Barnabas, which means "son of encouragement" or "son of consolation." Names mattered in the ancient world. A name revealed your character, your calling, your identity. And the fact that the apostles renamed Joseph "Barnabas" tells us everything we need to know about him: He was an encourager.

In a world full of critics, cynics, and condemners, Barnabas was the guy who saw potential in people. He believed the best. He gave second chances. He opened doors for others, and his ministry of encouragement literally changed the course of Christian history.

We first meet Barnabas in Acts 4, right after the believers in Jerusalem are described as being "one in heart and mind" and sharing everything they had:

*"Joseph, a Levite from Cyprus, whom the apostles called Barnabas (which means 'son of encouragement'), sold a field he owned and brought the money and put it at the apostles' feet." (Acts 4:36-37)*

This is significant. Barnabas was a Levite, which means he came from the priestly tribe of Israel. He had status. He had education. He had resources, and he gave it all away. Barnabas set the tone for generosity in the early church. He didn't just talk about sharing. He did it. He sold his property and laid the money at the apostles' feet, trusting that they would distribute it to those in need. This is the first glimpse we get of Barnabas' character: He was generous, humble, and fully committed to the mission of the church. His greatest act of encouragement was yet to come.

After Saul's dramatic conversion on the road to Damascus, he tried to join the believers in Jerusalem. But there was a problem:

*"When he came to Jerusalem, he tried to join the disciples, but they were all afraid of him, not believing that he really was a disciple." (Acts 9:26)*

Think about that. Saul (who would later be called Paul) had spent years hunting down Christians. He had dragged men and women to prison. He had stood by and watched Stephen get stoned to death. Now he was claiming to be a follower of Jesus. Nobody believed him. They thought it was a trap. Except Barnabas.

*"But Barnabas took him and brought him to the apostles. He told them how Saul on his journey had seen the Lord and that the Lord had spoken to him, and how in Damascus he had preached fearlessly in the name of Jesus." (Acts 9:27)*

Barnabas vouched for Paul. He risked his own reputation to give Paul a second chance. He saw past Paul's violent history and recognized the grace of God at work in his life. Without Barnabas, Paul might never have been accepted by the church. Without Barnabas, we might not have half of the New Testament.

One act of encouragement changed everything.

A few years later, the gospel began to spread to Antioch—a major city in Syria. Greeks were coming to faith in Jesus, and the church in Jerusalem wasn't sure what to make of it. So they sent Barnabas to check it out.

*"When he arrived and saw what the grace of God had done, he was glad and encouraged them all to remain true to the Lord with all their hearts. He was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and faith, and a great number of people were brought to the Lord." (Acts 11:23-24)*

Notice what Barnabas did: He didn't criticize. He didn't question. He didn't impose a bunch of rules. He saw the grace of God at work, and he rejoiced. That's the heart of an encourager. They celebrate what God is doing, even when it doesn't look the way they expected. Barnabas didn't stop there. He knew the church in Antioch needed a teacher. And he knew just the guy.

*"Then Barnabas went to Tarsus to look for Saul, and when he found him, he brought him to Antioch. So for a whole year Barnabas and Saul met with the church and taught great numbers of people. The disciples were called Christians first at Antioch." (Acts 11:25-26)*

Barnabas could have stayed in Antioch and built his own ministry. He could have taken all the credit but instead, he went and found Paul and brought him into the work. Barnabas was secure enough in his identity to share the spotlight. He didn't need to be the star. He was content to be the one who opened doors for others.

Barnabas and Paul were sent out by the church in Antioch as the first official missionaries of the Christian faith. Together, they traveled through Cyprus and modern-day Turkey, preaching the gospel, planting churches, and facing persecution. At first, the dynamic duo was called "Barnabas and Saul." Barnabas was the leader. Paul was his partner. Somewhere along the way, the order flipped. Acts 13:13, Luke starts referring to them as "Paul and his companions." Paul became the primary leader, and Barnabas stepped into a supporting role.

Some people might have been offended by that. "Hey, I was the one who vouched for you! I was the one who brought you to Antioch! And now you're taking over?" Not Barnabas. He didn't need the spotlight. He was content to let Paul lead, because Barnabas cared more about the mission than his own reputation. That's the mark of a true encourager: They celebrate the success of others, even when it costs them recognition.

After their first missionary journey, Barnabas and Paul returned to Antioch. A few years later, they decided to take a second journey, revisiting the churches they had planted, until they had a disagreement:

*"Barnabas wanted to take John, also called Mark, with them, but Paul did not think it wise to take him, because he had deserted them in Pamphylia and had not continued with them in the work. They had such a sharp disagreement that they parted company. Barnabas took Mark and sailed for Cyprus, but Paul chose Silas and left, commended by the believers to the grace of the Lord." (Acts 15:37-40)*

Mark had bailed on them during their first journey. Paul didn't want to give him another chance. Barnabas did. So they split up. Paul took Silas and headed to Asia Minor. Barnabas took Mark and went to Cyprus. At first glance, this seems like a tragedy. These two great men had a falling out and couldn't work together anymore. Here's the beautiful twist: Both of them were right.

Paul was right to prioritize the mission. You can't build a strong team if people bail when things get tough. Barnabas was right to give Mark a second chance. Sometimes people need grace and mentorship to reach their potential. Guess what? Barnabas' investment in Mark paid off. Years later, Paul himself wrote to Timothy and said:

*"Get Mark and bring him with you, because he is helpful to me in my ministry." (2 Timothy 4:11)*

Mark became one of Paul's most trusted companions. He also wrote the Gospel of Mark—one of the four accounts of Jesus' life in the New Testament. All because Barnabas believed in him when no one else did. We don't know how or when Barnabas died. Church tradition says he was martyred in Cyprus, but we can't be certain. What we do know is this: Barnabas' legacy isn't measured by how many sermons he preached or how many churches he planted. His legacy is measured by the people he encouraged.

Without Barnabas, Paul might have been rejected by the church.

Without Barnabas, Mark might have given up on ministry.

Without Barnabas, the church in Antioch might never have flourished.

Barnabas didn't need to be the star. He was content to be the one who helped others shine, and in doing so, he changed the world. In the Christian life, everyone needs grace. We've all made mistakes. We've all let people down. We've all failed in ways big and small. Maybe you've tried to serve in your church, but people won't let you forget your past failures. Maybe you've stepped away from ministry because you feel disqualified. Barnabas' story is for you. He saw past people's failures and believed in their potential. He gave Paul a second chance. He gave Mark a second chance, and both went on to do incredible things for God.

If you've been given a second chance in your walk with Christ, don't waste it. And if you're able to give someone else a second chance, do it.

The church needs more Barnabases - people who believe the best, who open doors, who invest in others even when it's risky. You can be that person. You can be a son or daughter of encouragement.

Discipleship means extending the same grace to others that God has extended to us. It means looking past people's failures to see their God-given potential. It means taking risks on people because we know God takes risks on us.

1. Barnabas was nicknamed "the son of encouragement." If people gave you a nickname based on your character, what would it be? What would you want it to be?
2. Barnabas vouched for Paul when no one else believed in him. Have you ever had someone take a risk on you like that? How did it change your life?

3. Barnabas could have stayed in Antioch and built his own ministry, but instead he went and found Paul to partner with him. How do you respond when someone else gets more recognition than you? What does Barnabas' example teach us about humility and teamwork?
4. Paul and Barnabas had a sharp disagreement over whether to give Mark a second chance. Who do you think was right? How do you balance high standards with grace for people who fail?
5. Barnabas invested in Mark, and years later, Mark became one of Paul's most trusted companions and wrote one of the Gospels. Have you ever invested in someone who didn't seem to deserve it? What happened?
6. **DISCIPLESHIP FOCUS:** Barnabas believed in people's potential, not just their past. In the Christian community, we often carry shame about who we used to be. How can Barnabas' example help you see yourself (and others) through the lens of grace rather than past mistakes?

Gracious God,

Thank You for Barnabas, whose very name means "Son of Encouragement." Thank You for his generous spirit that held possessions loosely and gave freely. Thank You for his ability to see potential in people others had given up on—in Saul the persecutor, in John Mark the quitter.

Father, we confess that we are often quick to judge and slow to encourage. We see people's failures rather than their potential. We hold grudges rather than offer second chances. We compete rather than champion others' success.

Give us Barnabas's heart—eyes that see what people can become in You, a spirit that builds up rather than tears down, hands that are quick to help and slow to point fingers. Help us to be encouragers in a world full of critics.

Show us someone today who needs our encouragement. Help us to invest in people others overlook. Give us wisdom to mentor, courage to stand with the unpopular, and grace to believe the best in others.

Make us good finders, Lord—people who look for and celebrate what You are doing in others' lives.

In Christ's name,  
Amen.



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