

SESSION 6

ENCOURAGE ONE ANOTHER



*When have you seen something
go viral?*

QUESTION #1

#BSFLrelationships

Encourage people in their relationships with Christ and one another.

THE PASSAGE

Acts 11:19-26

THE BIBLE MEETS LIFE

Until recently, not too many people were familiar with amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS), also called Lou Gehrig's disease, an incurable, progressive, muscle-weakening disease that ultimately ends in death. Then the ice-bucket challenge emerged in summer 2014. People were challenged to pour a bucket of ice and water on their heads to raise awareness of ALS and encourage donations for research. Whoever did this challenge could then challenge others.

Thanks to videos being posted on social media, the idea went viral. People all over the country and even in other nations jumped on the bandwagon and took the challenge. By the end of 2014, few did not know about this fatal disease. Even more importantly, over \$100 million was raised, allowing research efforts to be tripled.

The ice-bucket challenge shows how something exciting can spread quickly. The early Christians, however, did not need an ice-bucket challenge to motivate them to share Christ. They had a message of life they were eager to share. In the Book of Acts, we meet a man named Barnabas who lived a life of sharing and encouraging others to share. He took the challenge to follow Christ and then encouraged others to do the same.

Acts 11:19-21

19 Now they which were scattered abroad upon the persecution that arose about Stephen travelled as far as Phenice, and Cyprus, and Antioch, preaching the word to none but unto the Jews only.

20 And some of them were men of Cyprus and Cyrene, which, when they were come to Antioch, spake unto the Grecians, preaching the Lord Jesus.

21 And the hand of the Lord was with them: and a great number believed, and turned unto the Lord.

KEY WORD

Grecians (v. 20)—Literally “Hellenists.” Describes the people who identified themselves with Greek culture, customs, and language. The term sometimes would have referred to Grecian Jews but here means Gentiles.

In the earliest days of the church, two characteristics stood out: It was a movement among Jews and it was largely confined to Jerusalem. The Holy Spirit had come on the early believers while in Jerusalem (Acts 2:1-4), and while the church was growing by leaps and bounds, the new Christians pretty much stayed right where they were.

All that changed, however, when Stephen was killed (7:58–8:1). The Jewish leaders had been growing increasingly hostile toward the Christ followers, which led to Stephen’s death. He became the first martyr in the church, and after his death a great persecution broke out against the church in Jerusalem. As a result, believers scattered throughout Judea and Samaria. While we might think they were simply running for their lives, they took with them the gospel of Christ. “Therefore they that were scattered abroad went every where preaching the word” (8:4).

Our passage mentions that believers had made their way to three places in particular: Phenice (Phoenicia), Cyprus, and Antioch.

They were “preaching the word” in these places, but they shared it with “none but unto the Jews only.” Following Jesus was merely considered an extension of their heritage and religion; it was not viewed as something separate from Judaism. It makes sense, then, that Jewish believers would take the message of Christ to other Jews. It was their comfort zone. Christians were not necessarily opposed to Gentiles becoming believers, but the assumption was that Gentile believers would step into the Jewish faith, of which the gospel was only a part.

That approach changed in Antioch. Antioch was the third largest city in the Roman Empire, containing between 500,000 and 800,000 people. Some believers didn’t just go to their fellow Jews; they “spoke unto the Grecians, preaching the Lord Jesus.” The good news pushed them out of their comfort zones to talk to the Greek-speaking non-Jews. The actual term used here for *preaching* is the word from which we get our word *evangelism*; it certainly could include what we think of as preaching but it also encompassed any way we tell others about Jesus. As Michael Green observed, these early believers “gossiped the gospel” wherever they went.¹

DIGGING DEEPER



THE GENTILE MISSION

Acts chapter 11 as a whole is devoted to the foundational events in the Gentile mission of the church. Two different churches played the primary roles. The Jerusalem church, led by the apostles and comprised mainly of Aramaic-speaking Jewish Christians, recognized the divine leading in Peter’s witness to Cornelius and concluded that God intended

to lead the Gentiles to repentance and life (11:1-18). The Antioch church, established by Hellenists, those Greek-speaking Jewish Christians who had to flee Jerusalem after the martyrdom of Stephen, began to put this principle into practice and to reach out to the Gentile population (vv. 19-30). Antioch was a natural setting for the Gentile mission to begin in earnest.

John B. Polhill, Acts, vol. 26 of *The New American Commentary*, gen. ed. E. Ray Clendenen (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1992), 268.

Difficulties and persecution are not barriers to sharing the gospel. Without doubt, these early Christians faced persecution, but they simply allowed the persecution to push them into new areas of evangelism! Wherever they went, they encouraged people to follow Christ. What does this look like today?

- ▶ Persecution of Christians has been routine procedure in China for decades, but believers still find ways to reach out to others. With no planned events or “church growth strategies,” Chinese Christians continually have encouraged others to follow Jesus. It is estimated that up to 200 million people in China are followers of Christ.
- ▶ Christianity is increasingly being marginalized in the American culture. We may not yet be facing the degree of persecution experienced by the early Christians or believers in China, but we still can and should follow the example of these bold witnesses who talked about Jesus unashamedly.

Why do we sometimes shy away from certain groups of people when sharing the gospel?

QUESTION #2

Acts 11:22-24

22 Then 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.

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.

24 For he was a good man, and full of the Holy Ghost and of faith: and much people was added unto the Lord.

We need leadership. Teams need coaches, businesses need CEOs, and churches need pastors. The early church had the leadership it needed in Jerusalem, and those good leaders sought to encourage other churches and ensure the church was teaching and growing as it should. So they sent Barnabas to Antioch. Barnabas was an ideal choice for several reasons. He was from Cyprus (4:36), as were some of the believers who joined the early movement of God in Antioch. This also meant Barnabas was a Hellenist, a Jew whose language and culture was more Greek than Hebrew. Thus, he was well positioned to assess what God was doing among the Gentiles.

Once in Antioch, Barnabas did three things:

1. **Barnabas saw the grace of God at work.** Why did Barnabas see God's grace? He was looking for it! God is working even now; we simply need the eyes to see. At this moment, music is playing around us, but that doesn't mean we automatically hear it. Radio waves carry this music, and we only need the right kind of antenna or receiver to hear it. In the same way, we simply need to tune in to see God at work!
2. **Barnabas rejoiced.** When we focus on seeing God at work, we're drawn to praise Him. Barnabas's spiritual eyes and joyful heart naturally led him to do the third thing.
3. **Barnabas encouraged them.** Barnabas consistently was a source of encouragement to others. His name was "Joses" (Joseph), but he had such a habit of encouraging others the apostles nicknamed him "Barnabas, (which is, being interpreted, "The son of consolation)" (v. 36). When other disciples wanted to keep a young believer named Saul of Tarsus at arm's length because of his past persecution of the church, Barnabas reached out to him and encouraged the church in Jerusalem also to accept him (9:26-27).

Barnabas's actions grew out of his character.

- ▶ **He was a good man.** We don't need more superstars; we just need some good men and women, people of character who treat others with love and dignity.

- ▶ **He was full of the Holy Spirit and faith.** When Luke wrote the Book of Acts, he used a similar description for Stephen (6:5). It is a fitting description of a person who trusts God and lives surrendered to the power and work of the Holy Spirit.

Of all the marks of Barnabas, the one we see most consistently here and throughout the Book of Acts was his gift of encouragement. He was a good man, led by the Spirit of God to encourage others to follow the Lord.

Hopefully, we've all had a "Barnabas" in our lives, someone who has encouraged us to grow closer to Christ. Whether or not that's been the case, we can ensure others have a "Barnabas" in their lives. We can be people of encouragement.

What captures your attention about Barnabas in this passage?

QUESTION #3

Acts 11:25-26

25 Then departed Barnabas to Tarsus, for to seek Saul:

26 And when he had found him, he brought him unto Antioch. And it came to pass, that a whole year they assembled themselves with the church, and taught much people. And the disciples were called Christians first in Antioch.

The church in Antioch was growing "and large numbers of people were added to the Lord." Barnabas needed help—and he knew who he wanted: Saul. Barnabas was already familiar with Saul, having supported him after his experience on the road to Damascus. It's likely that Paul spent about ten years preaching in Syria and

Cilicia—the area of his hometown (see Gal. 1:21-23)—after his conversion. So Barnabas went “to Tarsus, for to seek Saul.”

One of the greatest ways to encourage people to serve and minister is to let them work alongside us. Jesus did this with His twelve apostles; Saul (later called Paul) would do it later with others like Silas, Timothy, and Luke. And that is what Barnabas did with Saul. Saul was not a novice to ministry. He had been preaching and teaching, but now Barnabas brought him to Antioch to help with the church. Together “they assembled themselves with the church, and taught much people.”

Saul already had a missionary zeal, and Barnabas was always looking for opportunities to encourage others to come to Christ. The church at Antioch had also been blessed with several other learned prophets and teachers. Under their collective leadership, it’s no surprise that church was the first the Holy Spirit called to send out a missionary team—and that team was none other than Barnabas and Saul (see Acts 13:2).

When have you been challenged to leave your comfort zone as a disciple of Jesus?

QUESTION #4

Notice the pattern of Barnabas’s encouragement of Saul. Barnabas had been the one who sought out Saul/Paul. They served together in the beginning as “Barnabas and Saul” (11:30); as their ministry progressed, however, Paul took the more prominent role. Over time, they became “Paul and Barnabas” (13:43). Barnabas was quite willing to step back and allow Paul to take the lead.

How can we encourage others to step up and serve? We can:

1. **Let the person watch.** When you’re teaching and mentoring, start by modeling what to do. For example, let the person observe you sharing your faith.

- 2. **Serve together.** Let the person participate and lead right alongside you.
- 3. **Hand off.** Let the person do the task or ministry on his her own. You've mentored, trained, and guided. Now let the person run with it, but always be there with encouragement and praise.

What are some advantages in doing God's work together?

QUESTION #5

ENCOURAGING OTHERS

Here are some ways to encourage others:

Give a hug to a friend who is feeling down

Leave sticky notes with words of affirmation

Call to encourage and pray for a friend

Send a gift card to recognize something special

Bake cupcakes and deliver to a neighbor

Treat a coworker with candy or special coffee

Other:

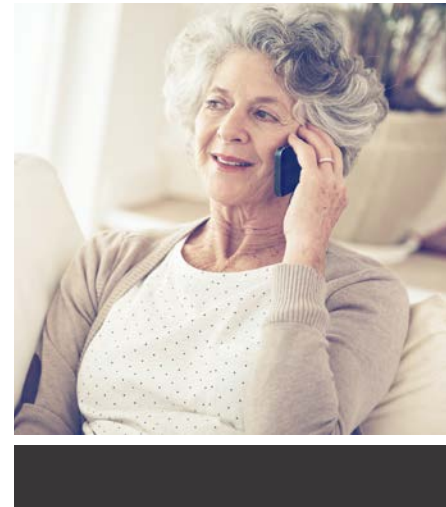
Circle two or three things you will do this week to be intentional in encouraging others.

LIVE IT OUT

We are surrounded by people who need encouragement. What will you do to encourage others to grow in Christ and serve Him? Choose one of the following applications:

- ▶ **A note of thanks.** Identify one person who has encouraged you. Write a note to him or her and express your gratitude for the help and encouragement.
- ▶ **A word of encouragement.** Take time this week to encourage someone in their walk with Christ. Make a call, write a note, or come alongside the person you know who needs a word of support.
- ▶ **A relationship of encouragement.** Develop an ongoing relationship with someone that includes regular meetings. Mentor the person in a particular area of life and encourage his or her growth in Christ.

Are you ready to see encouragement and support go viral in your church? In your community? If so, you can be the catalyst by choosing to encourage those around you to grow in Christ and grow together as the body of Christ.



END NOTE

1 Michael Green, *Evangelism in the Early Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2004), 243.

Share with others how you will live out this study: **#BSFLrelationships**