

SESSION 4

BARNABAS: ONGOING ENCOURAGEMENT

▶ ***The Point***

Christ-centered living chooses encouragement, not criticism.

▶ ***The Passage***

Acts 4:36-37; 9:26-27; 11:19-26

▶ ***The Bible Meets Life***

No one views a skyscraper in its early stages and marvels at the extensive nature of its rebar. We don't want to see what makes it stable. We want to see what makes it pretty. Even though rebar isn't pretty, it's incredibly necessary. It's what gives a building its stability and strength. It's what holds everything together below the surface.

In a similar way, we've all had people who propped us up at different points in our lives. These people have supported us in our faith even when it felt like the whole world was being turned upside down. And though these people might never receive the applause, they play an essential role of support in our lives. It takes incredible strength of character to be this kind of support for another. It's easier to drift down the road of criticism. The Christian, though, must resist that temptation. We must choose to build up instead of tear down. In this session, we'll look at a man whose own nickname reflected his consistent encouragement of others—and we'll see in his life an example worth following.

▶ ***The Setting***

During Pentecost, the Holy Spirit empowered the small band of Christians remaining in Jerusalem. Peter preached a powerful sermon, and about 3,000 people were added to the church. From that moment, the believers' conduct gained favor with the people, and the church's numbers grew. Jewish authorities arrested Peter and John for healing in Jesus' name and ordered them to stop. Instead, the Christian community proclaimed the gospel boldly. Believers shared what they owned, selling property to help meet one another's needs.

What does the Bible say?

A Levite (4:36)—A descendant of Levi, Jacob and Leah's third son. Levites were the bottom tier of Israel's three orders of priests. They assisted other priests and sang at morning and evening sacrifices.

Hellenists (11:20)—People influenced by Greek thought. It could refer to Jews born outside the holy land who spoke Greek and followed Greek customs, or to "Gentiles." Context dictates the reference—here, Greek speaking Jewish Christians.

Acts 4:36-37; 9:26-27; 11:19-26

^{4:36} **Thus Joseph, who was also called by the apostles Barnabas (which means son of encouragement), a Levite, a native of Cyprus,³⁷ sold a field that belonged to him and brought the money and laid it at the apostles' feet.**

^{9:26} **And when he had come to Jerusalem, he attempted to join the disciples. And they were all afraid of him, for they did not believe that he was a disciple.²⁷ But Barnabas took him and brought him to the apostles and declared to them how on the road he had seen the Lord, who spoke to him, and how at Damascus he had preached boldly in the name of Jesus.**

^{11:19} **Now those who were scattered because of the persecution that arose over Stephen traveled as far as Phoenicia and Cyprus and Antioch, speaking the word to no one except Jews.²⁰ But there were some of them, men of Cyprus and Cyrene, who on coming to Antioch spoke to the Hellenists also, preaching the Lord Jesus.²¹ And the hand of the Lord was with them, and a great number who believed turned to the Lord.**

²² **The report of this came to the ears of the church in Jerusalem, and they sent Barnabas to Antioch.**

²³ **When he came and saw the grace of God, he was glad, and he exhorted them all to remain faithful to the Lord with steadfast purpose,**

²⁴ **for he was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and of faith. And a great many people were added to the Lord.**

²⁵ **So Barnabas went to Tarsus to look for Saul,**

²⁶ **and when he had found him, he brought him to Antioch. For a whole year they met with the church and taught a great many people. And in Antioch the disciples were first called Christians.**

GET INTO THE STUDY



5 minutes

Notes



DISCUSS: Question #1 on page 91 of the PSG: **“What are some interesting nicknames you’ve encountered over the years?”**

ACTIVITY (OPTIONAL): Make a game out of the image on page 91 of the PSG. See if group members can guess the name of the actor and musician represented by that image. (The answer is Ice-T.)

Note: If you have the ability to play video, you can also show the funny commercial from Allstate® Insurance featuring “Ice-T at a lemonade stand,” which is another complement to Question #1, above. You can find that video on the Leader Extra! blog at biblestudiesforlife.com/adultextra.

GUIDE: Direct group members to “The Bible Meets Life” on page 92 of the PSG. Introduce the theme of encouraging others by reading or summarizing the text—or by encouraging group members to read on their own.

GUIDE: Call attention to “The Point” on page 92 of the PSG: **“Christ-centered living chooses encouragement, not criticism.”**

LEADER PACK: Use Pack Item 10, “Timeline of the Early Church,” to provide some context for your group members on the different events that led up to Barnabas and Paul meeting and ministering together.

PRAY: Transition into the study by praising God for the people who have encouraged you throughout your life. Acknowledge that encouragement as a blessing, and pray that you and your group members would gain a better understanding of your call to encourage others as you study God’s Word together.

TIMELINE OF THE EARLY CHURCH

- A.D. 33:** The death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus
- A.D. 34:** Paul’s conversion on the road to Damascus
- A.D. 37:** Paul’s first visit to Jerusalem after his conversion
- A.D. 37-40:** Paul returns home to preach the gospel in Tarsus
- A.D. 37-41:** Caligula serves as Emperor of Rome
- A.D. 40:** Conversion of Cornelius and his family
- A.D. 41:** Barnabas and Paul serve together in Antioch
- A.D. 47-49:** Paul, Barnabas, and John Mark make the first missionary journey



STUDY THE BIBLE

Notes

Acts 4:36-37

³⁶ Thus Joseph, who was also called by the apostles Barnabas (which means son of encouragement), a Levite, a native of Cyprus, ³⁷ sold a field that belonged to him and brought the money and laid it at the apostles' feet.



LEADER PACK: Use Pack Item 8, "People and Places," to review the people you've studied so far—and to show group members where Barnabas ministered within the ancient world.

READ: Acts 4:36-37 on page 93 of the PSG. Read the text out loud or ask a volunteer to do so.

GUIDE: Use the first two paragraphs in the Commentary section to provide group members with some background information on this man named Joseph (or Barnabas).

RECAP: Read aloud the first paragraph after the Scripture on page 93 of the PSG:

The first few chapters of the Book of Acts provide a beautiful glimpse into the early days of the church. These followers of Jesus, who had earlier scattered in fear during His crucifixion, had been filled with the power of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. They emerged from that experience no longer timid, but boldly confident in the authority of Jesus as the rightful Lord of the universe. They gladly shared the good news of forgiveness in Christ, and thousands more believed.

DISCUSS: Question #2 on page 93 of the PSG: **"What makes generosity a source of encouragement?"**

Note: Another way to ask this question would be: "What is it about generosity that people usually find encouraging?"

TRANSITION: In Acts 4:36-37, we're introduced to Barnabas and his primary character trait. As we jump to Acts 9:26-27, we'll see how that character trait triggered a major moment in the early church.

ALTERNATE QUESTION:

How did Barnabas's actions in this passage encourage others?

Acts 4:36-37 Commentary

Use what you have to encourage others.

[Verse 36] In these verses, Luke, the inspired writer of Acts, introduced a believer who would become highly significant in the Christian movement—although the physician/historian gave no hint in this introduction of the man’s crucial role in the early church. The Hebrew name **Joseph** means “he adds or increases” and would prove to be prophetic. Joseph was a **Levite**; he belonged to the Israelite tribe of Levi, an order of priests who were dedicated assistants in Israel’s worship system. He also was a Hellenistic Jew who spoke Greek and was influenced by Greek customs and ways.

Joseph was a native of **Cyprus**, an island in the Mediterranean Sea about 60 miles off the coast of Syria. The island had a large population of Jews. At a young age, Joseph may have moved to Jerusalem with his family. We cannot know when or how Joseph became a Christian, but Luke’s narrative presents him as a believer.

Jesus’ apostles had given Joseph the name **Barnabas**, which Luke translated to mean **son of encouragement**. The name Barnabas is made up of the Aramaic term *bar*, which means “son,” and the suffix *nabas*, whose meaning is uncertain. One suggestion is that it means “prophet” or “prophecy,” so that the name means “son of prophecy” and designates one who preached or exhorted. Another suggestion is that the name means “son of refreshment.”

The Greek word for “encouragement” Luke used for Joseph’s nickname has the sense of a cheering and supporting influence, of being an advocate. It can mean “exhortation,” “admonition,” and “consolation.” A form of the term designates the Holy Spirit, the One who comes alongside to support and to encourage—in the broadest sense, the Helper. Probably, Joseph’s apt nickname expressed his consistent character trait or disposition of helping others. To do so was part of his nature.

[Verse 37] In the Old Testament, Levites were not allowed to own land. Over the years, that prohibition had evidently lapsed. Either on Cyprus or in the land bridge of which the holy land was a part, Barnabas owned property. As other believers were doing (see Acts 2:45), he **sold a field that belonged to him**. He **brought** the total amount of **money** and gave it to the **apostles**.

The phrase ***laid it at the apostles’ feet*** was a way of expressing transference of ownership. His doing so indicated that believers’ sharing their possessions was organized and the apostles were responsible for distributing funds. Barnabas’s generous act was an example of his helping nature. Likely, his exhorting other believers was another example.



STUDY THE BIBLE

Notes

Acts 9:26-27

26 *And when he had come to Jerusalem, he attempted to join the disciples. And they were all afraid of him, for they did not believe that he was a disciple.*

27 *But Barnabas took him and brought him to the apostles and declared to them how on the road he had seen the Lord, who spoke to him, and how at Damascus he had preached boldly in the name of Jesus.*

READ: Acts 9:26-27 on page 94 of the PSG.

GUIDE: Use the first two paragraphs in the Commentary to give a brief summary of Paul’s conversion and early attempts to preach about Christ.

GUIDE: Encourage group members to read through the content on pages 94 and 96 of the PSG—especially the final two paragraphs on page 94, which provide insight on Barnabas’s decision to take a stand for Paul.

DISCUSS: Question #3 on page 94 of the PSG: **“What risks do we take when we stand up for others?”**

DO: Direct group members to complete the activity “Choose Encouragement” on page 95 of the PSG.

Use the following template to encourage someone who’s been on your mind in recent weeks. In the days to come, rewrite these words on a card and send it to that person.

Dear _____,
You have been on my mind for a while because _____

_____ .
You are someone I admire for many reasons, including _____

_____ .
Also, you are a blessing to me when you _____

_____ .
I always smile when I think about the way you _____

_____ .
I’m thankful to call you my friend!

ALTERNATE QUESTION:

Who has been an encourager in your life?



Acts 9:26-27 Commentary

Encourage others by standing with them and being their advocate.

[Verse 26] Acts 9:1-9 is the account of Saul's dramatic conversion. On Saul's way to Damascus to find Christians to take as prisoners to Jerusalem, the risen Jesus confronted him. Saul obeyed the Lord's directive, entered Damascus, received Ananias's ministry, and was baptized. Saul began preaching in the city's synagogues, strongly proclaiming Jesus as the Son of God. The Jews took steps to kill Saul, but his followers helped him escape, and he went to Jerusalem. (See 9:10-25.)

When Saul reached Jerusalem, **he attempted to join the disciples** or unite with the community of believers. Understandably, the Jerusalem Christians **were all afraid of him**. They were well aware of his past history of persecuting Christians. Thus, **they did not believe that he was a disciple**—a true follower of Christ. For all they knew, this was a clever ruse to infiltrate the church's ranks to identify Christians more easily for arrest. The story of his about-face from rabid persecutor to fellow believer was more than suspect to them.

[Verse 27] At this point, Barnabas became Saul's advocate. No doubt, Barnabas had watched Saul's attempt to attach himself to the Christian community in Jerusalem. Barnabas **took him ... to the apostles**, the 12 close followers of Jesus who served as the Jerusalem church's leaders. "Took" here has the sense of pulling someone aside. The implication may be that Barnabas talked with Saul privately, heard Saul's account of his conversion experience, and accepted it. Convinced of Saul's truthfulness and trustworthiness, Barnabas went with Saul to the church's leaders. If these leaders put their stamp of approval on Saul, he would be accepted among believers.

During the meeting with the apostles, Barnabas likely stood beside Saul to plead his case (one sense of the word "encourager"). Barnabas recounted Saul's life-changing experience and his bold proclamation of Jesus in Damascus. The phrase **had preached boldly** translates a Greek word that means "to speak freely, plainly, with authority." **In the name of Jesus** likely has the sense of "on Jesus' behalf" or "in promotion of Jesus" with His authority. Saul openly identified with the risen Jesus and courageously proclaimed Him.

We do a great disservice to the biblical record if we fail to pause and reflect on the monumental significance of Barnabas's being Saul's advocate before the early church's leaders to gain Saul entrance into the Christian community. Two factors were involved: tremendous risk and immeasurable gain. First, Barnabas risked his standing in the church by vouching for Saul. What if Barnabas were wrong, and Saul actually was trying to infiltrate the Christian community with hostile motive? Barnabas would have ushered the fox into the henhouse. From his side of the equation, he was putting himself out on a limb for Saul. Second, Barnabas's risk resulted in unimaginable gain. He was instrumental in gaining entrance into the Christian movement for a person superbly equipped to become its foremost missionary and the matchless interpreter of Christ. The early church owed Barnabas a debt beyond paying, and believers through the centuries have been his debtors.



STUDY THE BIBLE

Notes

Acts 11:19-26

¹⁹ Now those who were scattered because of the persecution that arose over Stephen traveled as far as Phoenicia and Cyprus and Antioch, speaking the word to no one except Jews. ²⁰ But there were some of them, men of Cyprus and Cyrene, who on coming to Antioch spoke to the Hellenists also, preaching the Lord Jesus. ²¹ And the hand of the Lord was with them, and a great number who believed turned to the Lord. ²² The report of this came to the ears of the church in Jerusalem, and they sent Barnabas to Antioch. ²³ When he came and saw the grace of God, he was glad, and he exhorted them all to remain faithful to the Lord with steadfast purpose, ²⁴ for he was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and of faith. And a great many people were added to the Lord. ²⁵ So Barnabas went to Tarsus to look for Saul, ²⁶ and when he had found him, he brought him to Antioch. For a whole year they met with the church and taught a great many people. And in Antioch the disciples were first called Christians.

READ: Acts 11:19-26 on page 96 of the PSG.

RECAP: Read aloud the final paragraph on page 96 of the PSG:

As we've seen, Barnabas encouraged others through his generosity, and the early church flourished. Then, by encouraging and supporting Paul, Barnabas helped the other apostles to accept his ministry in its early days. And, as we see in this passage, Barnabas encouraged the spread of the gospel in unlikely places among unlikely people.

ALTERNATE QUESTION:

Why is encouragement a necessary element in the church?

DISCUSS: Question #4 on page 96 of the PSG: **"Who has encouraged your spiritual growth over the years?"**

DISCUSS: Question #5 on page 97 of the PSG: **"How can you use your resources, gifts, skills, or talents to encourage others?"**

Note: Encourage group members to skim through the bullet list on page 97 of the PSG to spark ideas for answering this question.

GUIDE: Refer back to "The Point" for this session: **"Christ-centered living chooses encouragement, not criticism."**

Acts 11:19-26 Commentary

Encourage others by helping them grow spiritually.

[Verses 19-20] Believers were **scattered** because of persecution and **traveled as far as Phoenicia and Cyprus and Antioch**. Antioch in Syria was the Roman Empire's third largest city, almost 300 miles north of Jerusalem. Hellenized Jews—Jews who spoke Greek and practiced Greek customs and manners—lived there. Most of the scattered believers were probably Greek-speaking Jewish Christians, so they spoke **the word to no one except Jews** in readily understood common or marketplace Greek. The term **word** was shorthand for the gospel. The scattered believers proclaimed this good word.

The term **but** marks a turning-point in the Christian enterprise. Previously, believers had proclaimed the good news exclusively to Jews. Christians **of Cyprus and Cyrene**, however, **spoke to the Hellenists also**. They began to communicate **preaching the Lord Jesus**. The word **spoke** could have the sense of conversing (talking with) or preaching. Likely, the Christian witnesses did both. Here **Hellenists** is another term for Gentiles. Thus, the Christian spokesmen crossed the national and racial barriers between Jews and Gentiles.

[Verses 21-24] The Christian witnesses experienced great success because **the hand of the Lord was with them**. The result was **a great number** of Gentiles made Jesus their **Lord** by faith. Turning to Him involved turning away from worshiping idols and making Jesus their Ruler. The report of what was taking place in **Antioch** of Syria **came to the ears of the church in Jerusalem**. Though severe persecution had scattered Jewish Christians, the Jerusalem church remained the center of authority in the Christian movement. Thus, believers' activities needed the church's approval, or at least called for its scrutiny. The Jerusalem church chose **Barnabas** to go investigate. Most likely, the Jerusalem church's action was not hostile or unfriendly but showed its interest and was meant to relate the two churches. Barnabas observed the rapid influx of Gentile believers into the community of faith. He perceived what was taking place as **the grace of God** and rejoiced. True to character, he **exhorted** the Gentile converts. He continually urged them to go on remaining faithful **to the Lord**. With few words, Luke gave a glowing description of Barnabas and the reason for his conduct: **He was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and of faith**. Luke reported that **a great many people were added to the Lord** as they made genuine faith commitments to Jesus.

[Verses 25-26] With dramatic brevity Luke recorded one of the most significant events in the Christian enterprise (six words in the Greek text). The rapidly growing church required someone to help, so Barnabas **went to Tarsus to look for Saul**. A number of years had elapsed since Barnabas had vouched for Saul and gained him fellowship with the Jerusalem believers. "Look" means "to hunt up" and includes the element of difficulty. Barnabas **found** Saul and took him back to Antioch. The two worked in tandem **for a whole year**, during which time they **taught a great many** converts being brought into **the church**. Barnabas again acted as Saul's encourager, opening a door of significant service.



5 minutes

LIVE IT OUT

Notes

Dotted lines for taking notes.

GUIDE: Direct group members to page 98 of the PSG. Encourage group members to consider these options for supporting and encouraging others in the days to come:



- ▶ **Encourage friends.** Think of the people who are closest to you right now. What is one specific sentence you can say to each of them to encourage them?
- ▶ **Encourage your pastor.** Your pastor might be someone you don't consider when you think of encouraging someone. Take time this week to do so with a note or a conversation.
- ▶ **Encourage others in your community.** Part of encouragement is being willing to stand up for those who can't stand up for themselves. As a group, identify those people in your community and plan some actions you can do to stand up for them.

Wrap It Up

TRANSITION: Read or restate the Conclusion from page 98 of the PSG:

You are who you are because someone was willing to encourage you. That person, along with many others, form the "rebar" of your life—the support and structure that makes you stable. Now go and do likewise in the lives of others.

PRAY: Conclude by praying for the Holy Spirit to open your eyes, and the eyes of your group members, to the opportunities you'll have to encourage others this week. Pray for the courage needed to take advantage of those opportunities when they come.



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