

Barnabas

My parents called me Joseph, but I was **given** the name Barnabas – Son of Encouragement. It happened early in the history of the church when there were many poor believers joining us. I sold a field and laid the money at the apostles' feet. I got so much honor as a result that Ananias and Sapphira did the same. Well, almost the same thing. They **said** they were giving the whole price but actually kept back a portion. They were both struck dead by the Lord. **That** made a real impression on the fellowship – and scared at least a few away.

My greatest contribution, however, was in the help I was able to give to Saul of Tarsus. You may know that he was originally violently opposed to The Way, as we were then known. He was dramatically converted and began powerfully preaching that Jesus was the Christ. As you might imagine, many were suspicious and thought it was a trick to identify more of us for extermination. I used my influence to convince the Apostles that Saul was genuine.

Around that time, the Lord was showing us that the message was not just for Jews. Peter preached to a Roman Centurion, Cornelius, with the result that his whole family believed and received the Holy Spirit. Philip found ready acceptance of the good news among the Samaritans. He also baptized an Ethiopian eunuch, who was treasurer in the government of Queen Candice. All of us except the Apostles had been scattered out of Jerusalem after the stoning of Stephen. Believers from Cyprus and Cyrene went to Antioch and began preaching to the Greeks, with great success. I was sent by the Jerusalem church to investigate.

I saw clear evidence that the Lord was working powerfully in Antioch and encouraged them but then went to Tarsus to find Saul. We both came back and taught in Antioch for a year. It was there that the term "Christian" was first used to describe believers in Jesus. When a famine was prophesied, the church in Antioch gathered a gift for the Jerusalem believers and sent me and Saul to deliver it. When we returned it was with John Mark, a young believer who was my cousin.

In the church at Antioch there were prophets and teachers and while they were worshipping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, "Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them." This was the start of Saul's missionary career and I was part of it.

Amazing things happened. In the city of Paphos on Cyprus, the proconsul, Sergius Paulus, was very interested in the gospel. But Elymas, a Jewish sorcerer who was his attendant, opposed us. Paul, filled with the Holy Spirit, looked straight at Elymas and said, "You are a child of the devil and an enemy of everything that is right! Now the hand of the Lord is against you. You are going to be blind, and for a time you will be unable to see the light of the sun." Immediately mist and darkness came over him, and he groped about, seeking someone to lead him by the hand. When the proconsul saw what had happened, he believed. But Mark left and returned home. He didn't say why but I think that dealing with all this spiritual warfare was too much for him. Saul now started using the Greek version of his name, Paul.

At a synagogue in Antioch of Pisidia, after reading the Law and the Prophets, the synagogue rulers sent word to us, saying, "Brothers, if you have a message of encouragement for the people, please speak." Paul still looked and acted like a member of the Sanhedrin – which is what he had been. He summarized the history of the nation up to King David, and "from this man's descendants God has brought to Israel the Savior Jesus." He ended with a promise and a warning. "Therefore, my brothers, I want you to know that through Jesus the forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you. Take

care that what the prophets have said does not happen to you: 'Look, you scoffers, wonder and perish, for I am going to do something in your days that you would never believe, even if someone told you.'"

There was a warm reception after the meeting and the following Sabbath the whole city was there to hear. But the Jewish leaders had become jealous and talked abusively, disrupting the meeting. Finally, Saul said, "We had to speak the word of God to you first. Since you reject it and do not consider yourselves worthy of eternal life, we now turn to the Gentiles."

So, it continued in nearly every city. We still usually went to the synagogue first but also to the Gentiles. There was acceptance of the message but also opposition. In Iconium it developed into a plot to stone us. In Lystra, through Paul, a man lame from birth was healed. The crowds shouted, "The gods have come down to us in human form!" They took me to be Zeus, and Paul they called Hermes because he was the chief speaker. I guess I must have looked more impressive. I couldn't help rubbing it in later with Paul. Mark would have laughed. Then the priest of Zeus brought bulls to sacrifice.

Paul said, "Men, why are you doing this? We too are only men, human like you. We are bringing you good news, telling you to turn from these worthless things to the living God, who made heaven and earth and sea and everything in them." But then some Jews came from Antioch and Iconium and won the crowd over. They stoned Paul and dragged him outside the city, thinking he was dead. He wasn't, although he should have been. But we then moved on. After revisiting the believers all along the route we had taken, encouraging them and appointing elders, we returned to Antioch of Syria.

On arrival we found yet another challenge. There were some Jewish believers coming from Jerusalem who taught, "Unless you are circumcised, according to the custom taught by Moses, you cannot be saved." They were sincere but wrong. Paul and I had to go to Jerusalem to get a ruling from the Apostles and Elders. Peter started the discussion with a description of what the Lord had done in the household of Cornelius, then we told about the missionary journey. James summarized the consensus and issued a ruling that only asked the Gentile converts to abstain from food offered to idols and sexual immorality. We had now seen the Lord deal with opposition coming from outside and inside the church.

When Paul was ready to journey again, I wanted to bring my young cousin John Mark, thinking that he deserved another chance. Paul was adamant against it, and we split up. People wondered which of us was right and the answer is that the Lord wanted me to step aside for the next generation. Silas joined Paul and later, so did young Timothy. And even Dr. Luke, the historian, became part of the team. Mark still ministered, eventually becoming the one to follow Peter and record his teachings. I continued to teach and eventually both Mark and I were reunited with Paul.

I hope my story has been an encouragement to you. If you face opposition, do not be dismayed. If you separate from associates in the work of the gospel, continue to trust that the Lord has something in store for both of you. Don't give up on the young people you are mentoring. God has a plan for them, too!