

Barnabas: A Study in Boldness

Acts 13:44-52

Imagine that you are sitting in Spurgeon Hall, our fellowship hall, on a weekday afternoon. You recognize most of those who are in attendance. Around the tables, these folks are gathered to enjoy a delicious meal. As you listen in on the conversations, you are struck by the variety of emotions. At some of the tables, people are enjoying a good laugh. Others are more somber, speaking in low tones. As they head back for seconds, some stop to chat with those at other tables. They share funny conversations and quotes; then they pause to look around at others who are more subdued, not enjoying the humor of the moment. Some are wiping away tears. But the more you listen to these folks talk, the more you are struck with the reality: all these conversations pertain to you. Have you been honored in some way? Have you received some special reward? No, the fellowship meal I have in mind is after your graveside service. The people who are gathered have come to reminisce about you. They are grappling with the reality of your death. No one wants to speak ill of the dead, so some conversations end abruptly because no one wants to “go there.”

So these conversations you are imagining are in the future, about your past. What is it that you want people to be saying about your life story? Like Dickens' fictional character, Ebenezer Scrooge, in “A Christmas Carol,” it's time to realize that you can make choices. Using this text in God's glorious Word, you can make those choices in the next few minutes. Every one of us wants to evade dismal failure. Even more, we want to avoid being wildly successful at things that really don't matter. So how can we take the steps that will remove regrets and start moving toward rewards? God's Spirit has given us Barnabas, with all his boldness, as a guide to a rewarding life. You and I could learn the boldness of Barnabas.

Overview: Making Choices

Acts 13 describes the choices connected to hearing the Word of God (v. 44). **“And the next sabbath day came almost the whole city together to hear the word of God.”** On that Saturday (the Jewish Sabbath), the people of Antioch in Pisidia¹ made choices. Each and every time you hear God's Word accurately presented, you make choices. Will you obey the Lord or disobey? Whether or not you realize it, you are making those choices about your life story. To deny that you are making a choice is to plan to have regrets. But by using this text of Scripture, you can carefully plan for rewards. And when they chat at that fellowship dinner, they will talk about God's grace in the way you ran your race. In this text, some chose to object and blaspheme while others chose to believe and obey.

⁴⁵ But when the Jews saw the multitudes, they were filled with envy, and spake against those things which were spoken by Paul, contradicting and blaspheming. ⁴⁶ Then Paul and Barnabas waxed bold, and said, It was necessary that the word of God should first have been spoken to you: but seeing ye put it from you, and judge yourselves unworthy of everlasting life, lo, we turn to the Gentiles. ⁴⁷ For so hath the Lord commanded us, *saying*, I have set thee to be a light of the Gentiles, that thou shouldest be for salvation unto the ends of the earth.

Barnabas: Boldly Warning the Blasphemers

Paul had preached the gospel of grace on the previous Saturday in the synagogue:

The Gospel of G.R.A.C.E.

- The Glory of God, 17-26 (including the promise of the Messiah)
- The Rebellion of mankind, 27-29
- The Awful Penalty for the rebellion of mankind. 40-41
- The Christ who paid the penalty for the rebellion of mankind. 30-39
- Embrace Christ by faith today. 42-43

What were the results? According to Acts 13:43, "Now when the congregation was broken up, many of the Jews and religious proselytes followed Paul and Barnabas: who, speaking to them, persuaded them to continue in the grace of God."

So what happened? The following Saturday, when the Jewish people saw the crowds of Gentiles, they were furious. They became envious, and began to contradict the message, even using blasphemy. When the Scripture says that they were blaspheming, it refers to speaking profanely about sacred things. They were mocking and contradicting the gracious message of the Gospel. But Barnabas and Paul faced them with boldness.

How will you face this ardent resistance? Bear in mind that those who oppose believers have one advantage: they can always shock you by sinning more than you do. According to Proverbs 26:4, you don't answer the fool by becoming like him. They can shock people with sin, but believers want to see people saved by grace. Verse 46 tells us, "**Then Paul and Barnabas waxed bold . . .**" Such boldness is associated with the power of the Holy Spirit (Acts 4:8,13; 4:31). By learning the boldness of Barnabas, we can face such ardent resistance.

■ **Making a Choice about the Message**

Consider their response to the critical blasphemers: 1) They reminded their critics of the privilege that God had graciously given them. 2) They warned them that the rejection of the Word meant that they had judged themselves unworthy of eternal life. This is a bold warning to every blasphemer. There are those who were raised by godly parents in Christian homes, but they have turned to critical blasphemy. They need to remember their remarkable privilege and remember that rejecting the Gospel will bring eternal punishment. In this moment, you are making a choice. Will you have eternal regrets, or eternal rewards? If you choose to reject

Christ's gracious gospel then you are passing judgment on yourself. You are judging yourself to be unworthy of eternal life. Of course, this is a horrifying choice, made even more horrific by the rejection of your gracious privilege of hearing the gospel of grace.

■ Making the Choice to be Like the Messenger

I pray to God that you are listening to this message with rejoicing in your heart. You are joyous because you have believed – embracing Christ by faith today. But for you as a believer, there is also a choice to be made. Are you willing to be filled with the Spirit in order to boldly warn the critical blasphemers around you? Those mockers are wise in their own estimation (Proverbs 26:5), and the warning that you must give. When someone rejects your gospel with blasphemy how will you respond? Will you boldly warn them that they are judging themselves to be unworthy of eternal life?

So what are we learning about the boldness of Barnabas? When faced with those who try to bar their message with blasphemy, godly leaders warn them by boldly proclaiming Biblical truth. 45-47

- With the careful consideration of a strategy built on Scripture. 46, 47

They didn't change their message in order to please a larger crowd. They held fast to the Gospel of grace. They also held fast to their mission strategy: **"It was necessary that the word of God should first have been spoken to you . . ."** This strategy of "to the Jew first and also to the Greek" was later expressed in Romans 1:16 and Romans 2:9-10. Just as the Lord had first revealed His Word to the Jewish people, so even today we ought to emphasize giving this good news to Jewish people. But there is a warning implicit with this privilege: when they reject this privileged priority in blessing, they insure their priority in punishment.

To have boldness like Barnabas, we must have a good grasp on a Scriptural strategy. By being Biblical, we can be bold. Then it's all a question of what it will take to stop you. Evangelist Bob Jones, Sr. frequently said, "The greatest ability is dependability. The test of your character is what it takes to stop you." Apparently, the Jewish rejection of the Gospel was based on their ethnic beliefs. We must be sure to proclaim the Gospel graciously to all people without racial or ethnic bias.

- With a solemn warning about the rejection of the Gospel, 46 (see 13:40)

One week earlier, Paul had graciously warned the Jewish people about the dangers of rejecting the Gospel. Quoting from Habakkuk 1:5, he preached, "Behold, ye despisers, and wonder, and perish: for I work a work in your days, a work which ye shall in no wise believe, though a man declare it unto you" (Acts 13:40). If we are to be God's servants, we must preach a warning but welcoming Gospel. Robert Murray McCheyne once said, "Appeals to the careless come with power on the back of some massy [sic] truth. See how Paul does, Acts 13:40, Beware therefore lest . . . Hebrews 2:1."ⁱⁱ Using the massive truth of Scripture, we must warn those who have

become careless. This has been described as “afflicting the comfortable and comforting the afflicted.”

- With a careful consideration of how to be like the Savior

Please stop to consider the fascinating truth of Acts 13:47, **“For so hath the Lord commanded us, saying, I have set thee to be a light of the Gentiles, that thou shouldest be for salvation unto the ends of the earth.”**

Now we need to exercise care here, but there is a very important point to be made. We are not “preaching Barnabas;” we are preaching Christ. In 2 Corinthians 4:5 Paul wrote, “For we preach not ourselves, but Christ Jesus the Lord; and ourselves your servants for Jesus’ sake.” But Paul also wrote, “Be ye followers of me, even as I also am of Christ” (1 Corinthians 11:1). We need to keep these verses in mind to understand how Acts 13:47 applies to us today.

The verse they were quoting from is Isaiah 49:6. Speaking to God’s Servant, the Messiah, the Lord said, **“I will also give thee for a light to the Gentiles, that thou mayest be my salvation unto the end of the earth.”** This is one of the “Servant songs” of Isaiahⁱⁱⁱ. In Isaiah, God the Father ordained His Servant and Son to be “a light to the Gentiles.” In turn, Jesus said to His disciples, “You are the light of the world . . .” (Matthew 5:14). Paul later said of the Philippian believers, “. . . you shine as lights in the world” (Philippians 2:15). Jesus said repeatedly “I am the light of the world” (John 8:12, 9:5, 12:46). But He also said, “You are the light of the world . . .” What these verses are highlighting is the essential union between Christ and believers. This is why John wrote, **“But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship one with another, and the blood of Jesus Christ his Son cleanses us from all sin”** (1 John 1:7). Remember what Jesus asked Saul the persecutor on the road to Damascus? “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?” (Acts 9:4, 22:7, 26:14). Jesus did not say, “Why are you persecuting *them*?” He said, “Why are you persecuting *me*?” This highlights the essential union of Jesus Christ with every believer. So, Paul and Barnabas used Isaiah 49:6 to proclaim, **“For so the Lord has commanded us, saying, I have set thee to be a light to the Gentiles, that you should be a light to the ends of the earth.”** The Father had commanded the Son; the Son had commanded His apostles (Acts 1:8); His apostles had conveyed this command to their followers. So Paul and Barnabas could boldly say, “The Lord has commanded us . . .” In Hebrews 2:10-13, the Captain of our salvation called us “brothers!” Join our band of brothers and see that the Lord has commanded us to give the light to the Gentiles.

Before we leave this point, it is helpful to remember the connection with the next Servant song^{iv} in Isaiah 50. In that beautiful song, it is clear that God the Father was the disciple-maker for His own Son.^v In this beautiful song, the Disciple said of His disciple-making Father, **“The Lord GOD hath given me the tongue of the learned [a disciple], that I should know how to speak a word in season to *him that is weary*: he wakens morning by morning, he wakens mine ear to hear as the learned [disciple]”** (Isaiah 50:4). This verse gives us a fascinating insight as to how Barnabas became “the son of encouragement.” Or, for that matter, how has anyone

ever becomes a “son of consolation.” By learning to listen to the Lord – morning by morning – we learn “how to speak a word in season to him that is weary.” We know that Jesus grew in understanding (Luke 2:52) as the disciple of the Father. If we want to be like Barnabas – blessing others with boldness – we must also learn how to speak a word in season to him that is weary.” We need the blessing of the boldness of a Barnabas in these days.

You know the name “Davey Crockett” from American history. What you may not know about this man is that he abandoned his family. Famous though he was, even as a member of Congress (from Tennessee), Crockett was infamous for his vile reputation. On one occasion, he was sitting for a portrait by an artist named John Gadsby Chapman. Chapman said, “One morning when Crockett appeared for a scheduled sitting before going to the Capitol, Chapman immediately noticed ‘a marked change in his manner and general bearing, his step less firm and his carriage less erect and defiant.’ He saw a crumpled letter in Crockett’s hand and what he later described as a subdued expression on his face that had never been there before. Chapman asked if he had received some bad news, and Crockett told him that the letter was from his eldest son, John Wesley, in Tennessee, who spoke of his own religious conversion, and chastised his father for his public behavior, and his rank failure to tend to the family needs. ‘Thinks he’s off to Paradise on a streak of lightning,’ Crockett told Chapman, adding that the scolding ‘Pitches into me, pretty considerable.’”^{vi} But I say to you that John Wesley Crockett made a gracious move by appealing to his famous father to turn from his sin to the Savior.

Barnabas: Bolding Proclaiming the Bible

⁴⁸ And when the Gentiles heard this, they were glad, and glorified the word of the Lord: and as many as were ordained to eternal life believed. ⁴⁹ And the word of the Lord was published throughout all the region. ⁵⁰ But the Jews stirred up the devout and honorable women, and the chief men of the city, and raised persecution against Paul and Barnabas, and expelled them out of their coasts. ⁵¹ But they shook off the dust of their feet against them, and came unto Iconium. ⁵² And the disciples were filled with joy, and with the Holy Spirit.

The same Barnabas who was glad when he saw the grace of God (Acts 11:23) made the Gentiles glad with his preaching. They glorified the Word of the Lord – that is they believed God’s promises of salvation. Like Abraham (Romans 4:20-25), they believed God and God’s righteousness was placed on their account. And this was not merely of their own doing. Consider the mysterious, sovereign work of God in the words, “**and as many as were ordained to eternal life believed!**” The Gospel spread like wildfire. But the Jewish people had had enough, so they stirred up a mob and sent those missionaries away. In ministry endeavors, it’s important to take note of this kind of regional resistance against particular leaders. When it becomes clear to them that they are being targeted by persecution, it’s time to move on. They do so with the recognition that the Holy Spirit will continue to enable true disciples.

We can proclaim the Bible the way Barnabas did:

- In a manner that causes people to glorify God alone for Gospel grace, 48-52

- With the knowledge that they are fulfilling God’s purpose and plan, 48
- So that the Word of the Lord will run and be glorified, 49 (2 Thessalonians 3:1)
- So that Christ’s followers will be filled with the Holy Spirit and great joy, 52
- With the understanding that you may face great resistance, 50-51

Servant-leaders like Paul and Barnabas rejoice in the fact that the Holy Spirit transforms lives with the joy of Jesus. v. 52

On the evening of May 21, 1738, Charles Wesley embraced the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus Christ as his only hope of eternal life. This gifted servant of God eventually wrote six to seven thousand hymns. Many believe that his testimony hymn is “And Can It Be.” Think of these glorious words:

No condemnation now I dread,
 Jesus, and all in Him, is mine:
 Alive in Him, my living Head,
 And clothed in righteousness Divine,
 Bold I approach th’ eternal throne,
 And claim the crown,
 through Christ, my own.

We don’t know how Barnabas, the son of consolation died. But we know how he lived. He was part of a band of brothers that included Jesus Christ. He boldly warned the blasphemers. He boldly proclaimed the Bible.

If we had attended a fellowship dinner after his funeral, we would have heard more of his life story. But now let’s talk about you. What do you think that folks will say about you after your funeral? How will you be remembered? It’s time to start asking the Lord for wisdom to help you craft a life story. It’s time to start blessing others with grace as you run your race. Be bold like Barnabas.

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ⁱ Acts 13:14. Not to be confused with the city where their sending church was established in Antioch in Syria.

ⁱⁱ Andrew Bonar, *The Life of Robert Murray McCheyne*, Carlisle: Banner of Truth Trust, 1978, p. 79

ⁱⁱⁱ See *Servant Songs*, part 2, an audio message from Isaiah 49 accessed at <https://www.sermonaudio.com/sermoninfo.asp?SID=415131920374>

^{iv} See *Servant Songs*, part 3, audio message from Isaiah 50 accessed at <https://www.sermonaudio.com/sermoninfo.asp?SID=4151319374510>

^v See *The Disciple*, an audio message from Isaiah 50, accessed at <https://www.sermonaudio.com/sermoninfo.asp?SID=4816821271>

^{vi} Michael Wallis, *David Crockett, The Lion of the West*, New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2011, p. 267, citing Davis, *A Legend of Full Length*, p. 171. John Wesley Crockett was later elected to Congress.