

**Barnabas: A Brother in Troubling Times**  
Acts 14:19-28

Page | 1

***And there came thither certain Jews from Antioch and Iconium, who persuaded the people, and, having stoned Paul, drew him out of the city, supposing he had been dead. Howbeit, as the disciples stood round about him, he rose up, and came into the city: and the next day he departed with Barnabas to Derbe.*** (Acts 14:19-20)

Try to imagine the looks they got as that little band of disciples walked back into Lystra. One of these days, you may face a crowd like that. One group of citizens had been so delighted with Barnabas and Paul that they wanted to worship them. "But crowds are fickle, especially when their expectations are not fulfilled," one author said.<sup>i</sup> Another group stirred up the people to violence in order to bash Paul to pieces. As Rudyard Kipling wrote in his wonderful poem "If"

*If you can meet with Triumph and Disaster  
And treat those two impostors just the same.<sup>ii</sup>*

How on earth could you go forward in a situation like that which Paul and Barnabas faced? Only by the grace of God, my friend, only by the grace of God. Dr. Luke's comment that the mob "supposed him to be dead" leads us to believe that Paul was pummeled until he was close to death. Verse 20 tells us that a circle of disciples gathered around the bruised and beaten body of Paul, lying in the dust. But just imagine their excitement when one of them exclaimed, "He's alive!" And then Paul got up! Perhaps Paul thought of Micah 7:8 when he rose to his feet:

***"Rejoice not against me, O my enemy: when I fall, I shall arise; when I sit in darkness, the Lord shall be a light unto me."***

Apparently, Barnabas was not present when the violence broke out; otherwise, he would have been stoned as well. But just imagine that gathering band of disciples as Paul limped back into Lystra. When Barnabas saw the injuries, perhaps he thought of what the Lord had told Ananias about Paul: "**I will show him what great things he must suffer for my name's sake**" (Acts 9:16). You can well imagine how "the son of comfort" moved to support his brother who had been so badly beaten. The people of Lystra had never seen anything like this before. This incident certainly put an exclamation point on the gospel message they had been hearing. As the great Olympian, Eric Liddell, used to say, "God has a way of hiding triumphs under tragedies."<sup>iii</sup> Perhaps the pain of these bruising stones came to mind when Paul later wrote to Timothy,

***"I endure all things for the elect's sakes that they may obtain the salvation which is in Christ Jesus with eternal glory."*** (2 Timothy 2:10).

What can we learn? How could we face a crowd like this? Godly leaders learn to put no trust in the fickle favor of men, knowing that adoring crowds may soon turn into attackers. When the people of Iconium threatened them with violence (vs. 5-6), Barnabas and Paul had moved on.

But this attack in Lystra came on very suddenly. There was no time to flee. How will we face such danger? We can trust the Lord as we face deadly situations with the calm assurance that the living God will be honored in us “whether by life or by death.” (See Philippians 1:20.) As a believer, death will never take you until the Lord has accomplished His purpose for you. And even then, death will be no terror, but a kindly doorman to usher you into your eternal home.

Page | 2

Our focus in this series has been on Barnabas. What can we learn about how to be like Barnabas – a brother in troubling times? When our fickle society is alternately fawning and furious, we can go forward with faith. Proverbs 17:17 says, “A friend loves at all times, and a brother is born for adversity.” Accompanying Paul and ministering to believers, Barnabas was a brother in troubling times. This text is full of little hints and clues about the influence of Barnabas. Following his lead, we could help others be fruitful, be fearless and be faithful.

## **FRUITFUL**

**Believers like Barnabas help their Christian brothers and sisters to be fruitful in troubling times. 20-21**

We would be remiss if we did not take note of the importance of Derbe and Lystra. These were not great cities, but rather outposts. But if we ignore these geographical references, we could miss an important reminder. To see the connection, turn to Acts 16:1-2. **“Then came he [Paul] to Derbe and Lystra: and, behold, a certain disciple was there, named Timotheus . . .”** His testimony was well-reported in Lystra and Iconium (Acts 16:1-2). Timothy – such a significant figure in the New Testament – was from this area. It may have been on this first trip that Barnabas and Paul preached the Gospel to Lois, Timothy’s grandmother, and Eunice, his mother. Perhaps the young Timothy heard these missionaries preach and heard the startling stories about the stoning. But when Paul returned, he found a faithful disciple who became his close colleague in the ministry (Philippians 2:20). With the help of Barnabas, Paul continued his fruitful ministry of the Word in spite of the opposition they endured.

Zechariah 4:10 makes reference to those who despise the day of small things. I feel pretty foolish, but I made this mistake just this last week. It happened in our garden. I had been keeping an eye on a cucumber vine. This was in a garden box where an expectant groundhog had devoured every cabbage plant. But once the groundhog was gone, we replanted with squash and cucumber. (We replanted cabbage in the next box.) For the last few weeks, I’ve been watching that cucumber vine. It had beautiful green leaves and pretty yellow blossoms. But there were no cucumbers. Everything looked right. I even took a bit of cotton and used it to pollinate the flowers using another vine. We still had nothing. So, this last Thursday, I decided, “that’s it.” In Jesus’ words in Luke 13:7 “Why does it cumber the ground?” So with a pair of scissors, I clipped between two brown leaves and began to pull up the vine. And I immediately felt sick. I could feel the weight on the end of the vine, and I knew what that meant: cucumbers! There on the end of the vine (carefully hiding under the squash) were five cucumbers. I immediately whispered to the Lord, “I’ve learned my lesson! Don’t give up so easily. Don’t despise the day of small things. Be patient with people, even when they don’t seem to be bearing fruit Dr. Richard Snavelly, who pastored our congregation for 28 ½ years,

used to say, "I may not be the best preacher of the gospel, but no one has a better gospel to preach!" By God's grace, we can be patient people like Barnabas who help others to be fruitful.

## **FEARLESS**

Page | 3

**Believers like Barnabas help their Christian brothers and sisters to be fearless in troubling times, 21**

**"And when they had preached the gospel to that city, and had taught many, they returned again to Lystra, and to Iconium, and Antioch,"**

Note the word "they" in this verse. They preached the gospel of the risen Lord Jesus who had died for the sins of mankind. [They] taught many. They returned to those cities. Barnabas and Paul were side by side. Think carefully about verse 21. Paul and Barnabas went right back into the same city where Paul had been stoned! They marched right back into the places where they had been opposed and threatened. Just imagine the thrill in the hearts of the disciples they had won to the Lord. That former lame man from Lystra was probably leaping for joy!

The Gospel changes lives and those new believers can change a community. You may have read the story or seen the film about *The Bridge over the River Kwai*. Though it is poorly presented by the film, the story is substantially true.<sup>iv</sup> WWII POW's like Ernest Gordon were forced to build a bridge for the Japanese railway. As they marched back and forth to the camp, it was common for them to see Buddhist priests with silver begging bowls. When an exhausted POW would drop by the side of the road, the priests would ignore him. But the unbelieving Gordon experienced something entirely unexpected. "One day the wretched prisoners passed through a village where the inhabitants, at some risk to themselves, gave them food, medicine and money. On enquiry, it was discovered that through the influence of a missionary, the villagers had been converted from Buddhism to Christianity. The contrast between the ethics of Buddhism and Christianity were crystal clear to the observant prisoners."<sup>v</sup> Those villagers were like Barnabas, and when Ernest Gordon was converted, he praised God for their fearless influence.

To some people, this boldness in the face of fear seems austere.<sup>vi</sup> Aileen Clayton, the first woman in British history to be commissioned as an intelligence officer, referred to Sir William Dobbie as "the austere governor."<sup>vii</sup> In a footnote in her book, "The Enemy Is Listening," she explained, "Sir William Dobbie was a member of the Plymouth Brethren."<sup>viii</sup> Dobbie became the governor of Malta, an island a mere fifty miles away from Italy, during World War II. He took command when he was sixty years of age, on June 10, 1940. During his time as governor (ending on May 7, 1942), Malta was bombed twenty-three hundred times!<sup>ix</sup> More than three times each day, the German bombers came to wreak devastation on this tiny island. The governor's daughter recalled that "there was a certain horrible regularity and method about them. Up to 100 bombers with fighter escort would come over at a time and go methodically round the various objectives, aiming from a high level or else dive-bombing."<sup>x</sup> Yet under William Dobbie's gracious Christian leadership, the people of Malta withstood the test. Whether they all knew it or not, they had a man like Barnabas at the helm. Aileen Clayton may

have thought him “austere” but his prayerful leadership led the people to be faithful when they had every reason to give up. With brother Barnabas by his side, Paul faced down his foes in a fearless manner.

## FAITHFUL

Page | 4

**Believers like Barnabas help their Christian brothers and sisters be faithful in troubling times, 21-28**

■ Helping to prepare fellow believers to go through troubles, 21-22

***And when they had preached the gospel to that city, and had taught many, they returned again to Lystra, and to Iconium, and Antioch, confirming the souls of the disciples, and exhorting them to continue in the faith, and that we must through much tribulation enter into the kingdom of God.***

Why did these men go back through those dangerous cities? They were intent upon confirming the souls of the disciples. They encouraged them to continue in the faith. They taught that every believer will go through trouble on the way to the kingdom. You can hear the echoes of Barnabas in these verses. When he first arrived in Antioch (of Syria), he saw the grace of God and was glad. He exhorted them all with purpose of heart to hold fast to the Lord (Acts 11:23). So they encouraged the disciples to continue in the faith.

By using the words, “the faith” we understand what Dr. Luke meant. Not merely “faith” but “the faith.” No just trust in the Lord, but trust in the teaching of Biblical doctrine. There is a desperate need for this in our own day. As we watch the days grow darker, we need a new grasp on Biblical doctrine. Our next Sunday school series will be designed to help us do just that.

■ Helping to prepare leaders for the troubling times ahead, 23

***And when they had ordained them elders in every church, and had prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord, on whom they believed.***

Paul and Barnabas ordained elders in every church. They prayed and fasted over these decisions. They used the fierce opposition of others to show the disciples how to persevere by prayer and the ministry of the Word.

In Pastor Rodney King’s excellent series from First Timothy, we have learned to “lay hands on no man suddenly” (as we ordain pastoral leaders). Paul and Barnabas prayed over these men and carefully commended them to the Lord – unsure if they would ever see them again.

As we have learned, the word “elders” is a reference to “pastors” or “overseers.” These three functions are all under the same office, whether we call them all “pastors” or all “elders.” They were responsible to feed people with God’s Word, take the oversight and be examples. (For further study, see Acts 20:28, 1 Peter 5:1-3.) Why did they ordain “elders” rather than “an elder” in each church? Several reasons come to mind, but for this message, let’s consider one reason: the fierceness of the opposition. Those church leaders faced

violent opposition. Perhaps some of their leaders would be put to death because of their stand for the Lord. This is a very good reason to have multiple pastors – especially in dangerous times. Do you sense that our own country is growing more violent? Has there been a sharp uptick in resistance to God’s work? If the answer is “yes” then would you make this issue a matter of prayer? Would God be pleased to raise up more of our men into the pastoral ministry right here in our own congregation?

■ Pressing on to continue to preach the Gospel, 24-25

***And after they had passed throughout Pisidia, they came to Pamphylia. And when they had preached the word in Perga, they went down into Attalia:***

Praise God for faithful men who preach the Word. They didn’t change their message. They continued to preach the God-glorifying Gospel of grace.

■ Serving by the enablement of God’s grace, 26

***And thence sailed to Antioch, from whence they had been recommended to the grace of God for the work which they fulfilled.***

These men had been sent out by the church at Antioch (Syria). There they had been commended to the grace of God. God’s grace had labored in them (1 Corinthians 15:10). They had commended those whom they had ordained to that same great grace.

■ Learning to fully understand the behavior appropriate to the Gospel

There was, however, one problem that occurred, and this can bring us to what is often called “a teachable moment.” Paul later described a confrontation in Antioch. It is likely that this happened when they returned from their first mission trip. This could have ended the teamwork between Barnabas and Paul. But it didn’t, and therein is the story. Paul described it in Galatians 2:11-14:

***But when Peter was come to Antioch, I withstood him to the face, because he was to be blamed. For before that certain [men] came from James, he did eat with the Gentiles: but when they were come, he withdrew and separated himself, fearing them which were of the circumcision. And the other Jews dissembled likewise with him; insomuch that Barnabas also was carried away with their dissimulation [hypocrisy]. But when I saw that they walked not uprightly according to the truth of the gospel, I said unto Peter before them all, If thou, being a Jew, livest after the manner of Gentiles, and not as do the Jews, why compellest thou the Gentiles to live as do the Jews?***

Paul said that the truth of the Gospel was at stake. That’s why he confronted these leaders. There was a natural distinction between Jews and Gentiles. It had been in place for generations. Today, we would refer to this as an ethnic or racial distinction. But that natural distinction had been eliminated by the supernatural grace of God. The church at Jerusalem had glorified God who had granted the Gentiles repentance unto life (Acts 11:18). Converted Jews and Gentiles had become a family in the Lord by the shed blood of Jesus Christ. Understanding all this, Peter, Paul and Barnabas had tremendous table fellowship with the Gentile brothers and sisters in Antioch. But then something happened. Representatives came to the church at Antioch from James, the pastor at Jerusalem. And suddenly, there was a chill in the air. Peter and Barnabas

didn't want to treat the preferences of their Jewish brothers lightly. But in so doing, they began to distance themselves from their Gentile brothers and sisters! Now to be clear, James at Jerusalem did not teach this unscriptural distinction. He had not instructed his representatives to distance themselves from the Gentiles. But because Peter and Barnabas thought there might be a problem, they started to back away from their Gentile friends. And Paul called them on it. Boldly, Paul proclaimed the bald-faced truth about Peter in a gathering of the believers. (Peter apparently acknowledged this and agreed, according to Acts 15). The problem was that they all believed the same things, but some of them had not worked it out practically. To avoid offending the Jews, they were willing to offend the Gentiles. And to Paul the really big shock was that Barnabas got caught up in all this racial or ethnic discrimination!

Barnabas, the son of encouragement, apparently received this exhortation very well. Perhaps he recalled the words **"Faithful are the wounds of a friend; but the kisses of an enemy are deceitful"** (Proverbs 27:6). Undoubtedly, Barnabas glorified God for his bold brother in the Lord because **"Iron sharpens iron; so a man sharpens the countenance of his friend."** (Proverbs 27:17).

■ Testifying and teaching others about the Lord's great work, 27-28

For our study of Barnabas, we can see that everything came out all right in the end. Verses 27-28 describe their ministry at Antioch: **"And when they were come, and had gathered the church together, they rehearsed all that God had done with them, and how he had opened the door of faith unto the Gentiles. And there they abode long time with the disciples."** Barnabas proved himself to be a brother in troubling times. By his gracious influence the believers around him were fruitful, fearless and faithful. May God grant that we could help each other in this same way!

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<sup>i</sup> John B. Polhill, *Acts*, vol. 26, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1992), 317.

<sup>ii</sup> Kipling's poem was a source of inspiration to Stanley Dale. Longing to be the kind of man described in the poem, Stanley Dale came to Christ and became a pioneer missionary. He is featured in Don Richardson's book, "Lords of the Earth."

<sup>iii</sup> Ellen Caughey, *Eric Liddell Olympian and Missionary*, Uhrichsville (OH):Barbour Publishing, 2000, p.103. Those words were remembered by Peter Marshall, who went on to become the chaplain of the United States Senate.

<sup>iv</sup> For instance, the British soldiers never took on the task of building that bridge out of a sense of accomplishment.

<sup>v</sup> Don Stephens, *War and Grace*, Webster (NY) Evangelical Press, 2006, p. 163 Ernest Gordon was converted as he led a Bible study in the POW camp in Chungkai, Thailand.

<sup>vi</sup> "Austere" meaning "severe or very strict in manner"

<sup>vii</sup> Aileen Clayton, *The Enemy Is Listening*, New York: Ballantine Books, 1980, p.171. Sir William Dobbie's autobiographical accounts are full of Scripture with amazing answers to fervent prayer. See "A Very Present Help, a Tribute to the Faithfulness of God" by Sir William Dobbie

<sup>viii</sup> *Ibid*, p. 360.

<sup>ix</sup> Don Stephens, *War and Grace*, Webster (NY) Evangelical Press, 2006, p. 77. King George VI awarded the island of Malta the George Cross for the bravery of their citizens.

<sup>x</sup> Clayton, p. 170