

Session 2

May 3, 2020

ENCOURAGE

Acts 9:26-28; 11:21-26

Discouragement is rampant in our society. With so many discouraging situations and circumstances to face, the last thing we need is discouraging friends! Dr. Adrian Rogers used to say, “There are some people who brighten up a room...simply by leaving it.” Unfortunately, some church folks can be just as bad. Let’s face it: bitter, negative, discouraging people are no fun to be around. On the other hand, even the gloomiest situation brightens up when someone brings to it a warm smile and an encouraging word.

The best-known encourager in the Bible was a man named Joseph, from the island of Cyprus. We know him better by his nickname, Barnabas, the “Son of Encouragement” (Acts 4: 36). The book of Acts highlights at least three characteristics of encouragers.

An encourager supports (9:26-28). We all have a past, but the apostle Paul *really* had a past. We first meet him in Acts 7, where he watched over the stoning of Stephen (Acts 7:58). In Acts 8, we learn that he was not only in favor of Stephen’s stoning, but in abolishing the church: “Saul, however, was ravaging the church. He would enter house after house, drag off men and women, and put them in prison” (Acts 8:1-3). Even though his life was radically changed by his encounter with Christ (Acts 9:1-18), his reputation as a persecutor of the church preceded him. Now, after spending three years with the Lord in Arabia (see Gal. 1:13ff), the disciples of Christ still feared him. Simply put, “they did not believe he was a disciple” (v. 26). Barnabas, however, became Paul’s advocate. The wording is interesting: Barnabas was acquainted with Paul on the one hand, and with the disciples on the other. Hence, he “took him” (as unto himself) then “brought him” (in the Greek, “led him”) to the disciples. In so doing, we see Barnabas as a consummate peacemaker. His credibility carried the day, and with his support, Paul’s preaching career was launched (v. 28). The lesson: *encouragers give the benefit of the doubt and show support.*

An encourager reaches out to others (11:21-24). While persecution is never a good thing, it did have the effect of spreading out believers, and the message of Christ went with them. By Acts 11, those uprooted believers were reaching beyond the Jewish population and engaging the Gentiles with the gospel (see vv. 19-21). Once again, skepticism arose; was it possible that Gentiles could be saved by the Jewish Messiah? The church at Jerusalem needed to investigate what was going on and wisely sent Barnabas to verify the conversions taking place. Luke the historian (the author of Acts) mentioned (1) Barnabas’ *findings* (he saw the grace of God; was glad; encouraged them in the faith); (2) Barnabas’ *faith* (he was a good man; filled with the Spirit; full of faith) and (3) Barnabas’ *fruitfulness* (large numbers of people came to Christ). The lesson: *encouragers reach out to others with openness rather than skepticism.*

An encourager serves alongside (11:25-26). An encourager is more than a cheerleader rooting from the sidelines. An encourager gets into the game! Barnabas not only saw the best in people, he saw the best in circumstances. With the Jews resistant to the gospel and Gentiles open to it, Barnabas sought out the best possible spokesman for the gospel and partnered with him in the work. Together, they stayed in Antioch for an entire year, teaching and training a growing

congregation of believers. It's no coincidence then, that the church at Antioch became the headquarters for Christian outreach and missions (see Acts chapters 13, 16, and 18). Moreover, the two were so instrumental in establishing the community of Christ-followers there, that "the disciples were first called *Christians* at Antioch" (v. 26). The lesson: *encouragers are not passive cheerleaders, but active partners in the ministry.*