

Acts 11:19-26

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[0:00] Page 920. Acts 11, 920. We're going to look at the Barnabas facts tonight. I'm sure we can all think of someone of whom we'd say, where would we be without that person?

In your family, you've probably got someone like that. Where would we be without them? Or certainly in church life, where would we be without that person? And so where would we be without Barnabas? Well, humanly speaking, we'd be without half of the New Testament.

Because it's Barnabas in Acts chapter 9 who introduced Paul or Saul of Tarsus as he was then to the others. They're very suspicious of him. They don't want to borrow him. But Barnabas recognised what God was doing in Paul's life and he introduces him.

He vouches for him to the other apostles. So can you imagine Christianity without the letters of Paul? And if it were not for Barnabas, John Mark would have gone down in church history as a backslider.

That's the guy that wrote Mark's Gospel. Depending on what you think of the synoptic problem, there would be other gaps in the other Gospels. We won't go into that now.

[1:12] But it was Barnabas who stood up for John Mark to Paul. When Paul wanted to ditch him and say, he's not going to stick with us, if it were not for Barnabas, humanly speaking, John Mark, well, wouldn't have written his Gospel.

Without Barnabas, humanly speaking, Christianity would not have become the great world movement that it is today because something really significant happened in the passage that we read. Look at what it says in Acts 11, verse 26.

For a whole year, they met with the church and they taught a great many people and it was in Antioch that the disciples were first called Christians. Up until then, Christianity had been thought of a Jewish sect, really.

But now at Antioch, the door is opening for the Gentiles to come in. Christianity is going to become the world movement that we know today and it's happening in Antioch.

It's why church historians have called Antioch the cradle of Christianity. It's no exaggeration, is it, that this church at Antioch became a hub of missionary activity.

[2:17] It planted churches all around the Mediterranean and humanly speaking, it's thanks to this man Barnabas because Barnabas was the guy that was sent down from Jerusalem to Antioch.

And the Barnabas factor is crucially important to the growth and development of the Christian church. The Barnabas factor is crucial for the development of any Christian church. And so let's try and understand what that might look like for us in IPC.

First of all, Barnabas the man. And then we want to look at the difference it makes when you have a man like Barnabas in your church and in your team. So first of all, who is this man?

Barnabas is not his name, his real name. His real name is Joseph. Barnabas is his nickname. We know that from Acts chapter 4. And we're told that his name was Joseph and he was a Levite, a Cypriot by birth.

And he is the one that the apostles call Barnabas. It's a nickname. It means literally a tower of strength or son of encouragement.

[3:25] I quite like that. I quite like that the early church gave themselves nicknames. Next weekend, I'm preaching at a church weekend in Northern Ireland from a minister called James Blair.

But when I preached at the Reformed Presbyterian Conference a couple of years ago, I was being introduced and then they said, and now Cream Bun is going to come and lead in prayer. And when you walked to the front, there was this man with a very small head and a very, very large body.

And all the ministers called him Cream Bun. It's an amazing thing, isn't it? I quite like that though. And so it's not the equivalent of Cream Bun, is it? But in the New Testament, they had nicknames for each other.

We mustn't romanticize them. Cephas, isn't it? What does that mean? It means Peter's nickname. Rock. We often think, don't we, of St. Barnabas or some stained glass window.

But we think of the early church far too formally, too institutionally. The people that you read of in Acts, they're just like us. And they loved each other and they hung out with each other and they gave each other nicknames.

[4 : 31] So, son of encouragement. So Barnabas comes into the meeting and they say, well, here he is, Mr. Encouragement. And if you look at Acts 4, it says that Barnabas, he was a field owner.

He sold a field that he owned. He bought it and then he sold it and he laid it at the apostles' feet. He didn't put the proceeds of that field into a superannuation fund.

He didn't put it into the bank. He brought the money and he laid it at the apostles' feet. It's always encouraging when people are generous, isn't it? When they're generous in support of the Lord's work. It's a sign of blessing in the church when giving begins to increase because people are committed, not to the elders, not because the elders are kind of putting a guilt trip on you or there's a big thermometer like they do put outside some churches.

But when people start to give, they are confident in their vision and they're committed to the cause. That's what's happening here. It's a supreme act of generosity on Barnabas' part, but it's much more than that.

Notice we're told two things about Barnabas back in Acts chapter 4. We're told that he was a Levite and a landowner. And in the Old Testament, those two things were exclusive. They shouldn't have happened.

[5 : 49] So when Moses is dividing up the land in the Old Testament and he's giving the tribes their inheritance, we're told there in Joshua that he didn't give a portion to the tribe of Levi and we're given the reason for that because the Lord God of Israel was the Levite's inheritance.

They weren't to be landowners because God was their inheritance just as he had promised. So how can a man who's a Levite and a landowner, how can he be that? Well, in the Old Testament that couldn't be.

But look what it says about this man who was a Levite and a landowner. It says he sold the field that belonged to him, he brought the money and he laid it, not on the temple treasury, he didn't go to the Jews with it, but he laid it at the feet of the apostles.

As if to say, Jesus, the Jesus the apostle preached, Jesus is now my inheritance. That's what's going on. And that's why he's such an encouragement. He's totally sold out on the Lord Jesus. He's not just donating to a good cause here. He's devoting himself to Jesus. Do you see that? It's the exact opposite of Judas. So Barnabas is Judas in reverse.

[6 : 56] Remember what we're told about Judas. Judas abandoned his commitment to Jesus. He walked out on Jesus and with the proceeds of that treasury, do you remember what he did? He bought the 30 pieces of silver. He bought a field.

He went into that field and he committed suicide. It's a tragically sad, sad story. Barnabas had a field and it was his by right. He owns it. He's got a holiday home in Cyprus, a timeshare property, and he sells it and with the proceeds of the sale of his land, he commits himself to Jesus as Lord of his life.

That's the kind of people we should aspire to be. If God's work is to flourish amongst us, generous, committed, Christ ones, totally sold out on the Lord Jesus.

Now let's take a look secondly at the difference this man makes to the cause of Christ. So come with me to chapter 11 and look at verse 23 in particular because that's the key verse that we need to look at. And in that verse, we're told three things about Barnabas.

We're told, first of all, what he saw. That's the first thing. And then we're told how he felt about what he saw and then we're told what he did about what he saw. So let me read the verse to you.

[8 : 06] Verse 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.

For he was a good man, followed the Holy Spirit in faith, and a great many people were added to the Lord. He was glad.

Let me unpack that verse. And what did he see? He saw the grace of God. Now not everybody does, do they? Do you remember in Luke 15 the elder brother in the parable of the prodigal son? There are lots of elder brothers in churches and elder sisters. What you see depends on a large extent on what you're looking for. Two men looked out through prison bars. One saw mud, the other saw stars. Imagine what might have happened if they'd sent someone else other than Barnabas down to Antioch.

[9 : 09] A church bureaucrat, perhaps. Wearing his ecclesiastical spectacles and his book of church order. Not wearing his book of church order, but carrying it. What would he have seen in Antioch?

He might well have seen the thin end of the wedge. If Barnabas had gone down to Antioch looking for trouble, he'd have found it.

Because something quite unprecedented was happening in Antioch. Look at verses 19 to 21. It all began with the persecution in Acts chapter 8 that broke out and we're told that Stephen was killed. Up to then, they'd been stockpiling Christians in Jerusalem and God from there scattered them. And those who were scattered travelled as far as Phoenicia and Cyprus and Antioch, spreading the word amongst the Jews.

And at first, some of them, however, went from Cyprus and Cyrene and they went to Antioch to speak to the Greeks telling them the good news of the Lord Jesus. These aren't professional church evangelists. They're not church planters that have been fully trained and equipped.

[10 : 17] These are grassroot Christians telling others. I was reading this week, somebody called this the great gospel sneeze.

That what happens in Antioch is there's a super spreader event. And now in Antioch, there's community transmission. It's like a flashback to COVID. And there are new cases every day and we're told what it says in verse 21.

And the hand of the Lord was with them. And a great number who believed turned to the Lord. It's a spontaneous work of the Holy Spirit. And when the Holy Spirit moves, often the rules go out the window.

It broke all the rules. It's never been done like this before. And no doubt in a situation like this, there would have been irregularities and there would have been anomalies to sort out.

And they would have been needed to be sorted out in the long term. But God was at work in Antioch. And Barnabas saw it. And he saw it. Others might talk about the problems there.

[11 : 19] Others might talk about the Jew-Gentile problem. Lots of people up there in HQ, Jerusalem, they were worried about that. But he didn't see it that way, did he? He saw it as an opportunity.

So years later at the Jerusalem Council, when there's a lot of Jew-Gentile tension and it's threatening to split the church, he didn't see it as a door to slam shut. He saw what God was doing. And he saw a door opening wide for the Gentiles to be brought in. He saw the grace of God, the generosity of God to all the nations. The God of all the earth, he saw what he was doing. That God was opening a door wide for all the people to come in. He saw the grace of God. And when we come here Sunday by Sunday, is that what we see?

In the faces of each other, in the conversations that we have, in the different issues of our lives, God is at work. And the grace of God.

[12 : 23] And notice Luke tells us how he felt. I love this. He saw the grace of God and how did he feel about it? He was glad.

How do you know someone's glad? How do you know someone's glad? They show it, don't they? We struggle a little bit with that as Presbyterians, don't we? Luke might well have seen this with his own eyes because according to tradition, Luke was a native Antioch.

There's some kind of evidence that he might well have been there at the time. If you look at the Western tradition, it introduces the words when we were gathered. Luke includes himself.

Be that as it may, whether it's right or not, I'm not sure. But Luke tells us that Barnabas saw the grace of God and he was glad. Why does he bother to tell us that? He tells us that because feelings matter. We need to be better at this, don't we?

It's not very British to show our feelings, but it is very Christian. I can remember when I started here and 20 years ago and we would meet on a Sunday night.

[13 : 36] That first Sunday night there were eight people and in the early days we'd meet in the church lounge, you remember it, and it gradually grew. Claire or Katie would be banging on the piano.

We'd be in this little room. We were all sitting on seats that were really low to the ground and when somebody came in everyone would turn around and see what it was. But occasionally people would turn up and some would come and they would just be delighted that there was a kind of Sunday evening service where the Bible was being taught and the Gospel was being preached and they'd rejoice.

But there were others who came from well-known churches and you could see them as they came in thinking, what on earth is this funny little cult?

And they'd turn up their nose. It doesn't look very impressive. But those who came and were so encouraged, it was such a real encouragement, wasn't it? What a difference it is when people are glad at the grace of God.

Barnabas came down, they must have been thinking instead, they must have thought, what is he going to make of us? These Gentiles, we used to be in thought of as second class citizens and now the big church in Jerusalem sends down an emissary.

[14 : 52] They must have thought, what is he going to think of us? But they didn't have to worry because as soon as he came through the door, it was written across his face. He was glad, he was glad to be amongst them, glad that God was at work amongst them.

And that is an understatement. It's much, it's much stronger. But literally, he's thrilled, he's overjoyed, he's literally jumping for joy. So excited to see God at work in people's lives and I'm not very good at this.

I am very good at concealing my gladness. Churches like ours often curb our gladness. Tragically, often I am more prone to put people down than to build people up.

instinctively, we can speak the angry and dismissive word and damn people with faint praise and pour cold water on things far ready to criticise and rebuke than to encourage.

Instead of rejoicing with the angels in heaven over one sinner who repents. What do we do? Well, we put him on probation. Let's see if it's for real.

[15 : 55] Let's see how he turns out or she turns out. If Barnabas got on the Elizabeth line tomorrow morning and saw someone reading his Bible, I would think, it's one of the JW's.

It's one of the cults. But not Barnabas. Barnabas would be glad someone was reading the Bible. He saw the grace of God and he was glad. There is almost, there is something, isn't there, God-like in his gladness.

I talk about this often. Do you remember that voice from heaven that came down in our Lord's baptism? He spent 30 years in obscurity and at the age of 30 he is about to take the public roads to the cross and there he is at the River Jordan and John the Baptist is baptising sinful men and women in the Jordan and what does Jesus do?

Jesus stands in the line of sinners. He doesn't stand aghast. He joins the queue of sinners even though he is without a sin, even though he is not a sinner.

He is numbered with the transgressors because he is stepping on the road to the cross and at that very moment at his baptism he sets his face towards Jerusalem to go to the cross to die for people like you and I and heaven is opened and a voice is heard from heaven that's my boy.

[17 : 23] This is my beloved son. I'm so pleased with you. When did you last tap someone on the shoulder and say something like that? When did you last send a text message or an email to encourage a believer?

How many missionaries, how many pastors, how many elders, how many Sunday school teachers, how many youth group leaders are languishing ready to give up just for want of a word of encouragement? He saw the grace of God and he was glad.

But it's not only what he sees and what he feels about it, it's what he does, that's what I want you to see. Look at verse 23. When he came and saw the grace of God he was glad and he exhorted them all to remain faithful to the denomination.

No, that's not right, isn't it? When he came and saw the grace of God he was glad and he exhorted them all to remain faithful to the church in Jerusalem. It doesn't say that. When he came and he saw the grace of God he was glad and he exhorted them all to remain faithful to remain true to themselves.

That's not what he says. Remain faithful to the Lord with steadfast purpose. How did, how does he do that?

[18:47] How did he build this church of baby believers into the church which changed the world, the cradle of Christianity? How did he do that? He did two things and Barnabas went looking for help. He realized he couldn't do it on his own so he recruited a team.

He knew he couldn't do it on his own so verse 25 he went to Tarsus to look for his old friend Saul. And we found him, he brought him to Antioch. It's so reminiscent, isn't it, of what happened in Geneva at the time of the Reformation if you know that story.

John Calvin was an intellectual and he was on his way to Germany with his books because he wanted to study and he happened to pass through Geneva and William Farrell at that time was the reformer in Geneva.

And William Farrell lays hold of John Calvin and says, Calvin may God curse you in your studies if you don't join me in the work that he's called you to do. It's a great word of encouragement, isn't it? I found it worked a treat on Reuben Hunter. And the rest is history, isn't it? It's great risk putting the team together.

[19:54] It's super risky. Paul, this man, had been persecuted. He persecuted the church. There were people in the church in Jerusalem who would have questioned Barnabas' judgment at this point but it was a strategically brilliant thing to do.

To bring Paul alongside him to share the load for one thing but at the same time for Paul to be discipled and that is because that's what Barnabas was all about. He's very intentional about it. So if you read the next chapters of Acts you can see this discipleship relationship developing and growing. It's on the first missionary journey out of Antioch it's Barnabas and Paul, Barnabas and Paul, Barnabas and Paul but very soon it flips, doesn't it?

And it becomes Paul and Barnabas, Paul and Barnabas, Paul and Barnabas. And in the end Barnabas slips from the seed. And what Barnabas is doing is he's making way for Paul to enter into the ministry and he's releasing him into his role as the great apostle to the Gentiles.

That's no small thing. So someone has said, isn't it, it takes more grace than I can tell to play the second fiddle well. And Barnabas was content to play second fiddle to Paul for the advance of the gospel.

[21:06] He's not hungry for the limelight. He doesn't want to start Barnabas International Ministries. He's willing to fade out of the picture altogether if someone better comes along. And his all-consuming passion is not that he would make a name for himself but that the name of Jesus would be known.

And that is what he's about. And he saw the potential in Paul from day one. It's Barnabas that introduces Paul to the others who vouched for him when others treated him with suspicion. It was Barnabas who recruited him for ministry and mentored him on his first missionary journey and eventually stepped back out of the way and released him into his role as an apostle of the Gentiles. And he saw Paul as a bloke worth watching. He recognized him as a brilliant scholar steeped in scripture, a Roman citizen, fluent in Greek, totally familiar with contemporary culture, just the man for the job.

So he recruited a team. And for a whole year, Paul and Barnabas, they meet with the church and do you see what it says there in verse 26? This is the other thing they did. They taught.

They taught a great many people. And so can you just see the vital, vital link there is between encouragement and the word of God? Just don't miss that link.

[22:27] How do you encourage people to remain true to the Lord? You teach them the word of God. Let me just show you that in a few places, okay? So early letter of Paul's, one of the earliest is Thessalonians.

The Christians are dying and Jesus has not returned and the Thessalonians are confused and they're bewildered. And their grief is compounded by a wrong thinking about Jesus' return. They're worried that their loved ones might miss out because Jesus didn't come back.

So what does Paul do? Paul spells out for them the doctrine of the second coming. He teaches them sound doctrine, healthy doctrine. And when you grasp sound doctrine, it puts strength into you.

It makes you healthy. And when Paul teaches them about the doctrine of the second coming, then in verse 18 of chapter 4 of 1 Thessalonians, he says, now encourage each other with these words.

Are words all we've got?

No, of course not. You can be there for one another in a situation like this when people are grieving. We cook meals for one another. We give practical help to one another.

[23 : 30] We phone. We text. You're doing that here, aren't you? But understand this. In the end, God's comfort comes to God's people through God's Word.

And we need to understand that so that we need to be in the Word. We need to know sound doctrine because that is how we'll build one another up. Think of the letter to Hebrews.

Hebrews 13, verse 22, whoever wrote it, some people actually think Barnabas wrote it, I don't know about that, but the writer in Hebrews 13 calls it a word of encouragement. Thirteen chapters, chock full of doctrine, full of Jesus, full of how Jesus fulfills the Old Testament.

It's a word of encouragement. So it encourages Christians who are tempted to slip back into Judaism, to go on with the Lord. And so, the word of encouragement is you teach them about Jesus and how much better than he is, how much better he is than angels, he's better than Moses.

Well, think of Romans. Romans 12, I appeal to you, the application part of the letter, I appeal to you, therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God to present your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship.

[24 : 44] That's the pointy end of Romans. Romans. Romans. That we are to be living sacrifices. And someone has said, isn't it, the problem with the living sacrifice, you're forever climbing off the altar.

And Paul says, I appeal to you, therefore, by the mercies of God. What are they? What are the mercies of God? Well, that's Romans 1 to 8. Romans, Hebrews, they're the biggest books in the New Testament.

We've got to get our heads around them, and we encourage one another with these words. So we're told, aren't we, for a whole year, Barnabas and Paul, they taught loads of people, don't underestimate what that is.

Antioch is the third largest city in the world at that time. Next to Rome and Alexandria, it's 20 times the size of Jerusalem. It's densely populated and cosmopolitan. It's far more multicultural than you would think.

Greeks, Romans, Indians, Chinese, Jews, Arabs, and Persians lived in Antioch. There were 18 different ethnic quarters separated by high walls to protect the inhabitants from each other. And now see what happens.

[25 : 48] The gospel comes to town and the walls come tumbling down. And that's what needs to happen in London, isn't it? And in every major city, people leave their ghettos and their old hostilities and they become Christ ones.

That's what's happened here. And that has come into their vocabulary, Christ ones in Antioch for the first time. And if the gospel can do that in Antioch, it can do that here, it can do that wherever else it is preached.

But it won't happen overnight. In Antioch, it took 12 months of week in, week out teaching the word of God. And I hope that's what you understand that we're committed to here, the regular systematic teaching and preaching of the word of God.

The word of God is spirit and life. And it renews us. It puts strength into us. It encourages us. When the people of God come to worship the living God and hear the word of God, God speaks.

There's nothing more important in church life. There's no better place for any of us than to be sitting under the ministry of the word. And we ought to be so thankful to God that we're able to do that. Right in the center of all of this is this man that the Lord raised up, Mr. Encouragement.

[27 : 21] This was his ministry. I am thrilled to say that there are lots of Barnabases and lots of Barnabases and IPC. Barnalases.

And the ministry of encouragement and encouragement is not something that you're born with. Encouragement is not in your genes.

It's not like the color of your eyes or the shape of your nose. It's not something that you can pick up by reading the right books or attending a seminar. It's not a skill. It's not a technique that you can learn. It is something spiritual.

So see what it says in verse 24 as we finish. Barnabas was a good man full of faith and the Holy Spirit.

Barnabas was a good man full of the Holy Spirit and of faith. That is not a bad epitaph to put on your gravestone, is it? I wouldn't mind having that on my tombstone.

[28 : 23] Full of the Holy Spirit. So think with me for a moment as we finish. Barnabas is Mr. Encourager. The Holy Spirit is the encourager par excellence.

In some translations of the Bible he's called the comforter. Right in the middle of that word comforter is the word fort. He is the fortifier. He is the one who puts strength into us.

The Greek word is paraclete. And so apparently every army had a paraclete whose job was to address the troops before going into battle.

To give them strength. To give them fortitude. To make them feel invincible. To give the team talk. That was his job. Isn't that what the Holy Spirit does in the heart of the believer?

As the word of God is preached he points to Christ and his finished work on the cross and he convinces us that we are more than conquerors through him who loved us.

[29 : 26] And so tonight you want to be a Barnabas and I really hope you do. Be filled with the Holy Spirit and point people away from yourself to Christ. Let's pray.