

Guest Preacher Rev. Alasdair Macaulay

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Preacher: Rev. Alasdair Macaulay

[0 : 0 0] As we seek God's help, can we turn in our Bibles to the second passage that we read in Acts 11. If you have a Bible with you, it will be helpful to have it open.

I'm going to make reference to chapter 13 and 15 of Acts as well. Beginning in chapter 11, let's read again verse 23.

It's referring to this man Barnabas. And it says in verse 23, When he came to Antioch and saw the grace of God, he was glad. And he exhorted them all to remain faithful to the Lord with steadfast purpose.

He exhorted them all, or he encouraged them all to remain faithful to the Lord. Fourteen years ago, I apparently said well done to a young mum who had just managed to get her four children out to the evening service, having already had them out in the morning.

How do I remember that conversation? Well, I don't. Well, I didn't. But last week, the mum reminded me of it and said, I've never forgotten how encouraging it was to hear these words.

[1 : 1 5] Well done. When she'd had a battle royal to get them all out the door. And well done to all the kids who are here tonight and to the parents who have brought them as well.

But that got me thinking about how encouragement can be such a blessing in the church. And I openly admit it's not one of my strong points at all.

But it is one that every one of us should seek to develop. And that's what I want us to think about tonight and to challenge us with developing this gift of encouragement.

So I want to study this fellow called Barnabas. Not his real name, actually. We find that out in Acts chapter 4. His real name was Joseph. But the apostles gave him this nickname, Barnabas, which means son of encouragement.

It's an appropriate nickname. We brought up in a place where many people have nicknames. Sometimes it's obvious why they got the name. Sometimes it's not so obvious. Sometimes they're appropriate names.

[2 : 1 7] Sometimes they're not appropriate names. But this one was definitely appropriate. It was a name that stuck for this man who was a huge encouragement in the early New Testament church.

This fledgling church that was just finding its feet. And if there's one thing that is needed in the church today, it is encouragers. Because life brings numerous discouragements.

You may have a discouragement this week. You may have a discouragement this day. We need people who will build one another up.

And that's how the Bible describes a Christian. That's how it tells us to be and to act and to live. To encourage one another. But it's a gift that needs work.

It's not something that comes naturally to most of us. For most people, I speak for myself, I suppose. But we're more ready to criticize, to find fault, to discourage. You know, if they had a course over in the hall.

[3 : 2 5] I can't work out my direction just now. It's that way. If they had a course in the hall on Saturday morning. How to be a better fault finder. You wouldn't need to go, would you?

And I wouldn't need to go. Because that kind of stuff comes naturally to us. We see the flaws in others. Much quicker than we see the potential.

So let's learn from Barnabas tonight. I want to study him in three different scenarios. Three places. Three situations in which we see him exercising this great gift that he had.

So first of all, he encouraged new converts. He encouraged new converts. And secondly, he encouraged a new preacher. And then thirdly, he encouraged a deserter.

So these three things. He encouraged new converts. He encouraged a new preacher. He encouraged a deserter. Just to give it some context, the book of Acts, I'm sure you know, recounts

the dramatic growth of the New Testament church following after Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection and ascension back to heaven.

[4 : 32] At that point, the New Testament church consisted of about 120 people. By the day of Pentecost, it was over 3,000. Not long after that, it was over 5,000. But very often, as is the case, when God is blessing his church, opposition comes.

Opposition followed. And that was no different for the New Testament church. Stephen was martyred. And the Christians had to flee. They were dispersed all over the place. And you see a reference to that in verse 19 of chapter 11.

Now, those who were scattered because of the persecution that arose over Stephen traveled as far as Phoenicia and Cyprus and Antioch, speaking the word to no one except Jews.

God had a purpose in that scattering that took place. It was to spread the gospel. And so these people who were dispersed, they shared Jesus with others, initially just to Jews.

But carry on reading into verse 20, and you see that then it goes to the Greeks. That's what's meant by the Hellenists. Those who were coming to Antioch spoke to the Hellenists also, preaching the Lord Jesus.

[5 : 46] And so the gospel spreads, and it spreads to these non-Jews. And in this chapter, chapter 11, or in this section at least, the focus is on the response to the gospel from those outsiders, from those non-Jews.

Verse 21. And the hand of the Lord was with them, and a great number who believed turned to the Lord. So there's blessing in Antioch.

Outsiders being brought in. And so news of that comes back to church headquarters in Jerusalem. And who are they going to send? They send Barnabas.

Why Barnabas? Because he had a proven track record. Because he was a man who was known to want to see the gospel flourish. He was a man who encouraged his fellow brothers and sisters in Christ.

He'd already encouraged the church by selling some lucrative land that he owned in Cyprus, and donating the proceeds to the church. That's always an encouragement to people.

[6 : 48] I think I mentioned in the morning, our youngest went off to university this week, and she was delighted with all the people who wished her well. But she was especially encouraged by the envelopes that had some cash inside them.

That's always an encouragement. And Barnabas had encouraged the church by selling this land and giving it to the church. But his encouragement went way beyond the giving of his finances. This man gave of his time. He gave of his talents. He gave of his company. He gave of his support. He gave of his enthusiasm to encourage other Christians in their walk with the Lord.

So let's study him then in these three scenarios that I mentioned. Encouraging new converts, encouraging a new preacher, and encouraging a deserter. So let's begin at Antioch, where he encourages new converts.

Look at what we read about his arrival in this place. So the revival has started. People are getting saved. The church sent Barnabas. Verse 23. When he came and saw the grace of God, he was glad, and he exhorted or encouraged them all to remain faithful to the Lord with steadfast purpose.

[8 : 03] Notice the first thing he does when he arrives. He just observes. He doesn't go in there headlong to give his view on what's happening, to instruct, to do anything.

He just observes. He saw. And what did he see? He saw that this was truly a work of God. He saw the grace of God. We don't know what evidence he saw, but he recognized that this was God's work.

Now, in our own island, and even in this area, past revivals, there were always people who were skeptical of whether this was a work of God or not.

There were people who believed that this was men's doing, but they were often wrong, and they missed out on a blessing because of that.

And we must always be careful, be wary of a critical spirit that looks for flaws and for faults because that can rob us of the blessing of God.

[9 : 10] Barnabas didn't go there to find fault. He went there to encourage, and we see that he did exactly that in verse 23. He was glad with what he saw, and he encouraged them all to remain faithful to the Lord with steadfast purpose.

Who wouldn't be glad at seeing outsiders coming in? But whenever outsiders come into the church, it causes some upset because they very often bring baggage with them.

When new people come into your church, there'll be noise. They won't tick all your boxes. They won't fit the bill of what your idea of what a churchgoer should look like.

And that can be uneasy, and that can be unsettling for people. But we should follow Barnabas here. He was glad. He rejoiced. And not just rejoiced, but he sought to help them.

He sought to encourage them. And that's what we should be doing. When new people come, not find fault, but seek to encourage them in their faith.

[10:20] Now, I'm pretty sure, it sounds a wee bit like he's given them a lecture here. He instructed them all to remain faithful to the Lord with steadfast purpose, but I'm pretty sure that wasn't his tone. I'm pretty sure this man led by example because that's what we see him doing everywhere else that we're going to study him.

Do you know if you're a mature Christian tonight, your life should be an example to others coming into the church? And if you think about that, and if you think about your life, if they were to observe your life, observe your interactions with them, if they were to study your commitment to the Lord and to the church and to your attendance at its services, would that likely encourage them?

Would that likely build them up? The New Testament teaches us that those who are mature believers should be encouraging those who are young in the faith.

Now clearly, the elders in any congregation have a responsibility to do that. They are to shepherd the flock in its entirety. But the New Testament also tells us, Titus 2, that older Christian women ought to teach younger women.

Are you doing that? If you're a mature Christian woman, are you taking someone under your wing? Are you encouraging other Christians in their faith?

[11:50] Are you praying for them? Are you reading the Bible with them? Are you spending time with them? And Barnabas was an encourager, both in his life and in his speech. Look at what we read of him, verse 24.

For he was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and of faith. Back in Acts 4, where we read, first of all, when he got this nickname, when the apostles called him the son of encouragement, the Greek word translated encouragement there is the word *paraklesis*.

Paraklesis. It is virtually the same word that Jesus used in John 14 to describe the Holy Spirit, who is the *parakletos*, the comforter, the encourager.

That's what the Holy Spirit does. And surely, it's not by chance that we read that this man who was filled with the Holy Spirit, that he mirrors that work of the Holy Spirit, being a comforter, being an encourager.

So Barnabas then, he encouraged new converts. And the result, verse 24, middle of the verse, and a great many people were added to the Lord.

[13:14] So as God was blessing this new church, this new gathering in Antioch, Barnabas is there encouraging the new believers. Are there people in your congregation that you could encourage, that you could come alongside, that you could help to grow in their faith?

You know, friends, you never know the impact of one small act of encouragement on another person.

I read just last week, actually, I heard a story about two young lads, you may be familiar with the story, two young lads who were passing a tent mission in Charlotte, North Carolina, 1934, so over 90 years ago.

Two 14-year-old lads. And they looked into this tent and the tent was full. There was a fellow called Mordecai Ham preaching. I don't know who his parents were, but they gave him biblical names anyway.

Mordecai Ham was preaching his heart out and there was no seats in that tent. And so the two lads walked away. But a fellow on door duty, a steward, went after them.

[14:26] And he encouraged them to come back and he promised them that he would find them a seat if they came back with him, which they did. And that night, these two young lads, two 14-year-olds, got saved under the preaching of Mordecai Ham.

One of them was Billy Graham. His friend was called Grady Wilson. And Grady Wilson went on to become the organizer of almost all of Billy Graham's crusades.

And between them, these two people brought the gospel to millions of people across the globe. Not because Mordecai Ham was a great preacher.

Maybe he was, maybe he wasn't. I'd never heard of him before. But because one man who was prepared to do door duty that night went after these two boys to encourage them not to walk away. One small act. God can multiply many, many times over. Barnabas encouraged new converts.

[15:40] But then secondly, I want to see him in a different scenario. Barnabas encouraged a new preacher. Looking now with me at verses 25 and 26, still in Acts chapter 11. Acts 11.25.

It then says, So end of 24, a great many people were added to the Lord. So Barnabas went to throw us to look for Saul. And when he had found him, he brought him to Antioch.

For a whole year they met with the church and taught a great many people. So Barnabas goes to headhunt Saul. Now, Barnabas had already been a massive encouragement to Saul at the time of Saul's conversion.

You will know, I'm sure, that Saul was the great persecutor of the church. He was the one who was having Christians put in prison. And on Damascus Road he met with the Lord Jesus.

He was dramatically saved. And then when he went to Jerusalem, the Christians there wouldn't have him. They didn't trust him.

[16:45] Yes, his conversion had been dramatic, but his reputation went with him. And so the Christians in Jerusalem, they were really wary of him. In fact, in Acts chapter 9, it tells us that, I'm just trying to find the verse.

Acts chapter 9, verse 26, Saul in Jerusalem. It says, when he had come to Jerusalem, he attempted to join the disciples and they were all afraid of him for they did not believe that he was a disciple. They did not believe that he was converted. And when you read there, he attempted to join the disciples, that means repeated. He repeatedly tried to be accepted by the church in Jerusalem and they wouldn't have him.

Saul. So who stood up for him? Who else but Barnabas. Barnabas took him under his wing.

Barnabas commended Saul to the church and very quickly Saul was then preaching in Jerusalem as well.

So there was a previous connection between them. Barnabas already encouraged Saul in the past when Saul had just been converted. And now two chapters on, in chapter 11, when the church at Antioch needs a preacher, who does Barnabas go looking for?

[18:01] He goes looking for Saul. He recognized that Saul had potential and he recruits him to Antioch where there's this great hunger for the Word of God, where people are getting saved.

And humanly speaking, you can't help but wonder would Saul ever have become the great preacher, the great man that he did to, who brought us half our New Testament.

Had this man Barnabas not come alongside him right at the start? And had this man Barnabas not then later encouraged him as a new preacher here in Antioch?

And Barnabas, he took a risk in doing so. I mean, Saul was still, he was still young in the faith, he was a novice in preaching terms, and he's bringing him into this wonderful situation where God is at work, where the need is great, where people, when people are, when people get saved, they need to talk.

And so there was a huge need here for teaching. Barnabas may well have thought, oh, this is big, I need to go, I need to go back to Jerusalem, to HQ, and tell them to send their most experienced man.

[19:12] But that's not what he does. He goes and he finds Saul, and he encourages this new preacher with great results.

Verse 26, it says at the end, in Antioch, the disciples were first called Christians. Do we look for younger Christians that we can encourage in their service to the Lord, that we can nurture and help to grow and develop?

We ought to be praying, asking God to show us where there is potential, so that we can then encourage that potential to develop. Notice this in verse 26, that Barnabas didn't just bring Saul to Antioch and then leave him to it.

It says that for a whole year, they met with the church and taught a great many people. He worked alongside him. He stuck by him.

He stayed with him. He nurtured his brother father in the faith. And it's interesting to see how their ministries develop after this because if you follow them, they go, after Antioch, they go to Cyprus.

[20 : 34] I'm moving into chapter 13, and I'm going to just pick out a couple of verses there, where they're off to Cyprus. And at some point during that mission to Cyprus, at some point, you find that Saul becomes the main man.

When they go there first, Barnabas is the main man. He's always mentioned before Saul. So chapter 13, verse 2, for instance. It says, set apart, middle of the verse, set apart for me Barnabas and Saul.

Barnabas is first, Saul is second. And then if you go down to verse 7, you see the same thing again. Sergius Paul has summoned Barnabas and Saul. But then as you continue reading through this chapter, Saul becomes known by his new name, Paul, verse 13.

It talks of Paul and his companions. And then near the end of the chapter, Paul is mentioned first before Barnabas. So verse 43, Acts 13, verse 43, and after the meeting of the synagogue broke up many Jews and devout converts to Judaism followed Paul and Barnabas.

And verse 50, the same thing. They stirred up persecution against Paul and Barnabas. So what's happened here is that Paul is now the one getting the attention.

[22 : 00] Paul is the one who's in the limelight. And Barnabas, he has to play second fiddle to Paul and he doesn't complain. He doesn't complain.

That's grace, friends. He's the man he encouraged as a new preacher who's taking the lead, who's taking his place in some ways. And Barnabas is content with that.

Barnabas rejoices in that. So he encouraged a new preacher. Let's move on to our third point.

Because you see, in any church, there will be those who have potential, there will be those who can be encouraged, there will be those who will grow, who will flourish, but there also will be those who struggle, who are not doing so well spiritually.

And I want us to see that they too were on Barnabas' radar. So that brings us to our final point. We saw that he encouraged new converts, he encouraged a new preacher, thirdly, he encouraged a deserter, a deserter.

Now this happens a little bit later on. When Paul and Barnabas, when they're in Cyprus, in chapter 13, during that trip, at some point, there's a fellow who was with them, a fellow called John Mark, and he deserts them.

[23 : 14] Now, it doesn't, there's no big deal about it at the time. You can see it in verse 13. So Acts 13, verse 13. Now Paul and his companions set sail from Paphos and came to Perga in Pamphylia, and John left them and returned to Jerusalem.

Not a big deal, doesn't, seems insignificant. John left them and returned to Jerusalem. But clearly it was significant, because turn with me to Acts 15, and this will be the last chapter we're going to dip into.

In Acts 15, Paul point blank refuses to take this John Mark with him on the next mission.

Let me read it, verse 36 and following. Acts 15, verse 36, the heading in the ESV is Paul and Barnabas separate. Verse 36, After some days, Paul said to Barnabas, let's return and visit the brothers in every city where we proclaimed the word of the Lord and see how they are.

Now Barnabas wanted to take with them John called Mark, but Paul thought best not to take with them one who had withdrawn from them in Pamphylia and had not gone with them to the work.

[24 : 34] And there arose a sharp disagreement so that they separated from each other. Barnabas took Mark with him and sailed to Cyprus, but Paul chose Silas and departed and so on.

So Paul refused to take this deserter with him on this next mission, but Barnabas gives him a second chance.

Now we have no idea why John Mark did desert them in Cyprus. Was he homesick? Was he afraid? Was he backslidden? Did he just feel inadequate in the presence of these two giants? We have no idea what happened, but he let them down, that's clear, he let them down. And now it's Barnabas who's willing to give him a second chance, when Paul wouldn't.

It seems like Barnabas saw potential in John Mark, just as he had seen potential in Saul much earlier. And once more he took a risk to encourage this man, and the risk paid off, because this fellow, John Mark the deserter, is the one who gave us the gospel of Mark.

[25 : 51] And how much poorer we would be were it not for Barnabas, who encouraged him. And in every church and in every fellowship there will be those who for any number of reasons begin to drift, desert us, go away from the fellowship.

How important it is that we don't write them off. How important it is that we seek to keep contact with them, to encourage them, and to seek to bring them back into the fold and back into the fellowship of God's people and God's church, and back into the service of God, which is what Barnabas did with John Mark.

And there's a lovely sequel to this event that we read of. Right at the end of the apostle Paul's life, so remember Paul wouldn't have John Mark, but right at the end of Paul's life, he's in prison, he's awaiting execution, when he wrote 2 Timothy.

So 2 Timothy is the last epistle that we have from Paul's hand. And in the last chapter of 2 Timothy, so basically pretty much the last words that we have from Paul, as he writes to Timothy, he says this to him, he says, get, I get emotional when I read this, the great apostle Paul says, get Mark and bring him with you, for he is very useful to me for ministry.

We're talking here about John Mark, the one that Paul wouldn't trust years before, but whom Barnabas encouraged. He came to be such a help and a support to the great apostle Paul, that it's him that he asks for, as he nears the end of his life.

[27 : 38] Friends, what a great debt we owe to Barnabas, who nurtured the great apostle Paul, who wrote half our New Testament, and who encouraged and restored John Mark, the deserter, who went on to write the gospel of Mark.

Is that not a great incentive to be a Barnabas, to encourage others? Even one person like Barnabas in a church will be a great encouragement.

But what if we all sought to develop this gift, to encourage one another? However, I can't finish without saying this, while we can learn from Barnabas, he was just a man.

He was a mere man. And despite all his gifts, and all his attractiveness as a Christian, he was not perfect. Barnabas failed.

You find that out in Galatians chapter 2. Barnabas messed up. In Galatians chapter 2, the outsiders have come into the church, these Greeks have come in, and then it is to cause trouble and unrest and ill-feeling among some.

[29 : 03] So much so that some of the leaders of the church started to distance themselves from the Greeks, including Peter. The great apostle Peter, who was preaching to the Greeks at one point, he began to distance himself from them.

And we read this in Galatians chapter 2, that the other Jews joined Peter in his hypocrisy, so that by their hypocrisy even Barnabas was led astray.

Even Barnabas was led astray. The man who went out of his way to encourage the new converts, the outsiders, Shantia. Now he too is distancing himself from them.

So friends, while we can learn from him, we need a greater than Barnabas to emulate. And that can only be the Lord Jesus Christ, the one of whom we read in Scripture that he went about doing good. He went about doing good. Barnabas let people down. Jesus never will. Jesus never will.

[30 : 15] So let us learn from Barnabas, but let us follow Jesus. And let us be those who go about doing good, seeking to encourage others.

And who knows, who knows how the Lord may yet use someone that you encourage.

1 Thessalonians 5 says, Therefore, encourage one another and build each other up. Amen. Let's pray. Lord, we thank you that there are people in the history of the church who had such an influence and such an impact for good.

And yet, Lord, we know that they were all flawed, for there is none good but you. So help us, Lord, to fix our eyes on Jesus as we run the race that you have set before us.

But help us to learn from the godly example of others who were an influence and a force for good in your church throughout history.

[31 : 32] Help us, Lord, to fan into flame the gifts that you have given us. If encouragement is one of these, help us to use it liberally. And if it's not, Lord, help us to prayerfully seek to develop that gift that we might be a help to others.

These things we ask in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. I'm going to finish singing in Psalm 4, the Sing Psalms version on page 4.

Psalm 4, and at verse 3, singing to the end of that Psalm, top of page 4 in your Psalm books. verse 3, know that the Lord has set apart the godly as his own.

The Lord will hear me when I call and my request make known. Psalm 4, from verse 3, to the end of the Psalm, to God's praise. verse 3, O that the Lord has set apart that God we know his own.

The Lord will hear me when I fall and my request make known.

[33 : 14] In anger did not break the song of said and be still present the righteous sacrifice and wait upon his well.

O who can show us any good I hear so many say O Lord shine on us with your light show us your face I pray you filled my heart with greater joy than others may have won't fear as they rejoice as they rejoice at harvest when grey and white are

I I will I do I will I do not sleep in peace my heart will raise secure for you alone O gracious Lord will me safe and sure now may mercy peace son and spirit you all forever amen