



THE MERCIFUL MEDIATOR

WEEK 5
07.03.16

FOCUS VERSE

Acts 9:27

But Barnabas took him, and brought him to the apostles, and declared unto them how he had seen the Lord in the way, and that he had spoken to him, and how he had preached boldly at Damascus in the name of Jesus.

LESSON TEXT

Acts 9:26–31

26 And when Saul was come to Jerusalem, he assayed to join himself to the disciples: but they were all afraid of him, and believed not that he was a disciple.

27 But Barnabas took him, and brought him to the apostles, and declared unto them how he had seen the Lord in the way, and that he had spoken to him, and how he had preached boldly at Damascus in the name of Jesus.

28 And he was with them coming in and going out at Jerusalem.

29 And he spake boldly in the name of the Lord Jesus, and disputed against the Grecians: but they went about to slay him.

30 Which when the brethren knew, they brought him down to Caesarea, and sent him forth to Tarsus.

31 Then had the churches rest throughout all Judaea and Galilee and Samaria, and were edified; and walking in the fear of the Lord, and in the comfort of the Holy Ghost, were multiplied.

Acts 11:25–26

25 Then departed Barnabas to Tarsus, for to seek Saul:

26 And when he had found him, he brought him unto Antioch. And it came to pass, that a whole year they assembled themselves with the church, and taught much people. And the disciples were called Christians first in Antioch.

Acts 13:1–2, 42–43

1 Now there were in the church that was at Antioch certain prophets and teachers; as Barnabas, and Simeon that was called Niger, and Lucius of Cyrene, and Manaen, which had been brought up with Herod the tetrarch, and Saul.

2 As they ministered to the Lord, and fasted, the Holy Ghost said, Separate me Barnabas and Saul for the work whereunto I have called them.

.....

42 And when the Jews were gone out of the synagogue, the Gentiles besought that these words might be preached to them the next sabbath.

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.



FOCUS THOUGHT

Many people have risen to productive lives and leadership roles as the result of someone daring to believe in them.



CULTURE CONNECTION

A Chance for Acceptance

“Bruce Pearl is a forgiving sort. It comes with the territory, of course. It’s just that Pearl is more intimately attuned to this emotion than most.” So wrote Ryan Black in the December 16, 2014, edition of the *Ledger-Enquirer* newspaper of Columbus, Georgia.

Black went on to write, “After all, Pearl needed someone to take a chance on him after his tenure at Tennessee ended in disgrace. Slapped with a three-year show-cause penalty from the NCAA . . . Pearl left coaching. . . . Yet he always wanted to pick up a whistle and get back to teaching the sport he loves. Auburn gave him that opportunity” (www.ledger-enquirer.com, “Bruce Pearl a firm believer in second chances,” accessed February 25, 2015).

What would have become of apostle Paul without someone like Barnabas to believe in him and give him a chance for acceptance in the fledgling church? Barnabas dared to believe in Paul’s conversion experience, and he took him and introduced him to the apostles. Little did any of them know at that time that this former persecutor of Christians would one day become an apostle to the Gentiles. But it only became a reality because of a man who dared to believe in Paul and fill the role of a merciful mediator, ensuring Paul’s opportunity to be given a chance as a new believer in Christ Jesus.

Second chances are good; we all sometimes need the opportunity of a second chance.

OUTLINE

I. PAUL’S BACKGROUND

- A. Was Born a Roman Citizen
- B. Was Raised as a Devout Pharisee
- C. Persecuted the Church
- D. Encountered Jesus on the Damascus Road
- E. Was Visited by Ananias

II. BARNABAS’S BACKGROUND

- A. His Name Means “Son of Consolation”
- B. He Had a Commanding Presence
- C. He Demonstrated Humility
- D. He Was a Lifelong Encourager

III. TAKING A CHANCE

- A. Mediators Are Discerning and Selfless
- B. Mediators Correct Misconceptions
- C. Mediators See Results of Mercy

CONTEMPLATING THE TOPIC

The first Pentecost uniquely equipped Christians for evangelism. When the first Christians received the Spirit, they spoke in languages they had not learned. Jews who had come from other nations to Jerusalem

for the Feast of Pentecost heard God being glorified in their own diverse languages. And the rest of the Book of Acts became the stage upon which this phenomenon was made manifest. By the end of Acts, the Christians had penetrated with stunning success to the very heart of Rome—the hub of the ancient world.

In general, religious beliefs in antiquity were confined to local boundaries, dialects, and ethnicities. Religions only occasionally gained adherents from outside their native habitations. Pockets of Eastern mysticism, Zoroastrianism, and the cults of Osiris and Dionysus sometimes appeared in the West. The people of Rome did indeed consider themselves devotees of the gods of Hellas (though they changed their names from Zeus to Jupiter, Ares to Mars, and so forth). And an occasional Gentile who was sympathetic to Judaism could be found among the citizens of Rome. The nature of most ancient religions, outside of Judaism, tended not to make universal claims. Where imported religions existed, they settled down comfortably side by side with the local religions.

However, the world had never before seen anything like Christianity. Not only did Christianity make universal claims about the God

it worshiped, but the gospel exploded outside the confines of its Palestinian cradle and became an international, multilingual, multi-ethnic thorn in the side of imperial Rome.

One man in particular embodied everything the Book of Acts is about: the apostle Paul. Paul was not merely “Pentecostal”; he was, in a sense, Pentecost itself. He was “all things to all men”; he left behind his deep-seated hatred and learned to love the kind of people he had despised.

He could command the attention of Athenian philosophers on Mars’ Hill and bewilder the Jewish Sanhedrin with his subtle understanding of the Mosaic law. He could win the affection of soldiers and tentmakers (Priscilla and Aquila) as well as earn the admiration of kings and governors. He used metaphors from both the Olympian games and the Torah with equal insight. He was instant “in season” and “out of season” (II Timothy 4:2). There may never have been nor may there ever be again a man so versatile an evangelist and useful for the worldwide mission of the church.

The same intellectual and organizational abilities that had made him perhaps the church’s single greatest threat before his conversion also made him the greatest Christian evangelist after his conversion.

A man’s potential for good is in direct proportion to his potential for evil; the greater the man’s potential to do great things, the greater his potential to destroy. We can see how dangerous Paul was to the early Christian movement by observing how indispensable he later became to the Christian cause. Imagine the damage he could have done to Christianity had the Lord not confronted him on the road to Damascus.

Who would trust such a man? If trust has to be earned, then who could trust the man who, though he had reportedly been converted, was in recent times “breathing out threatenings and slaughter against the disciples of the Lord” (Acts 9:1)? Perhaps his “conversion” was merely a ploy to ascertain the whereabouts of its key members. No doubt Saul (whom we know by his Greek name, Paul) was personally responsible for the imprisonment and death of many Christians’ friends and family members (Acts 22:4). It is likely he would have to face some to whom he

had personally administered beatings (Acts 22:19). How could they face him—much less trust him? There are, however, people who have accepted the ministry of mediation and encouragement. Barnabas was one of those people. He trusted Saul on the slimmest evidence.

The fate of the Gentile nations hung in the balance; the fate of Christianity depended on the ability of someone to offer unmerited trust to Saul. And Barnabas, having no guarantees except whatever promptings arose in his soul, extended the hand of friendship and brotherhood to him.

SEARCHING THE SCRIPTURES

I. PAUL’S BACKGROUND

A. Was Born a Roman Citizen

The term *person* meant something different in the Roman Empire than it means today. Today it refers to a rational being—specifically a human being considered in his or her own right. But in the Roman Empire, *person* referred specifically to one’s legal status. Only a free male could be considered a person and given legal status. Much as today a business attains legal status by being incorporated (that is, “to be given a legal body”) and therefore is granted by a government certain protections before the law, freeborn males were given legal privileges and guaranteed legal rights by Rome. Such men were called *Romaïos*, a Roman. Freeborn males in Italy were automatically Romans; and a family from one of the Roman provinces could attain, but only in special cases, Roman status (usually by having done a Roman governor or magistrate a favor).

Paul’s family hailed from Tarsus, a Roman province on the coast of modern-day Turkey. Because Paul was a Roman, he was able to use his legal status on three occasions to secure rights given only to Romans: He used his status to strike fear into the magistrates of Philippi (Acts 16:38) and the chief captain in Jerusalem (Acts 22:29); and he used his status to attain a hearing from Caesar (Acts 25:10). In fact, Paul called attention to the distinction between his acquisition of Roman citizenship by birth and the captain’s having had to pay for citizenship (Acts 22:28).

It seems that Paul's family was a highly respected clan in Tarsus—perhaps dear to the Roman officials there (in Philippians 4:22, Paul indicated he was on friendly terms with “Caesar’s household”). His connections allowed him to move about the Mediterranean with ease. The two relatives he named—Andronicus and Junia (Romans 16:7)—had Roman names; and his sister seemed to have had access to privileged information in Jerusalem and was able to dispatch her son to send Paul a warning (Acts 23:16). His status and connections made him a dangerous man to trifle with.

B. Was Raised as a Devout Pharisee

In spite of Paul's Roman background, his words to the Philippians leave little doubt to where his true sympathies lay. He was an ethnic Jew who freely described himself as having been zealous for the Jewish cause—even to the point of persecuting those who appeared to threaten Jewish stability (Philippians 3:6).

He was born “Saul”; and like King Saul more than a millennium before, he was born of the tribe of Benjamin. Perhaps he was named after a close relative, or perhaps he was named after Israel's first king. Ironically, whereas King Saul was described as head and shoulders taller than anyone, Saul of Tarsus was apparently so slight that somewhere along the way Greek-speaking associates nicknamed him Paul, which means “small” or “tiny.” He was described as a man who did not possess an imposing appearance (II Corinthians 10:10). One late-second-century Christian document (*The Acts of Paul and Thecla* 1:7) says of his appearance: “a man little of stature, thin-haired upon the head, crooked in the legs, of good state of body, with eyebrows joining, and nose somewhat hooked, full of grace: for sometimes he appeared like a man, and sometimes he had the face of an angel.”

Whatever his physical appearance, he possessed a keen and powerful mind. Paul was a formidable enemy. And though he had many enemies—some of them eventually as powerful as Rome itself—Paul usually came out on top. He was inclined to the Pharisees' interpretation of Jewish theology and eschatology, and he went to great lengths to enforce these views.

The Pharisees were theologically orthodox, but they adapted a policy of tolerance toward Roman rule. Rome was hypersensitive about any rival claims for the imperial throne. The idea of an invincible, heavenly Messiah-king would only encourage Rome to lay down more oppressive measures and dispatch more brutal troops to Jerusalem. For the sake of the peace of Jerusalem and the sanctity of the Temple, Pharisees attempted to suppress any radical Jewish movement that threatened the fragile status quo. The Christians, who at first were believed merely to be the latest iteration of yet another radical sect of Judaism with its claims of a risen and soon-returning Messiah, seemed to threaten this stability. As a Pharisee, Saul of Tarsus shared this apprehension and joined in the attempt to suppress and even eradicate these Christ followers.

C. Persecuted the Church

Being a persecutor and later a recipient of so much crowd violence, it is appropriate (and disorienting at the same time) that the first mention of Saul in the Bible showed him at the mob execution of Stephen. (See Acts 7:58–8:1.) It appears he stood among the executioners but did not personally participate in the stoning.

After being called before the council for questioning, Stephen, a Christian deacon, preached to them, beginning with God's call to Abraham (Acts 7:2). When Stephen accused the council members of not keeping the Law and of being betrayers and murderers (Acts 7:51–53), the council members were “cut to the heart” (Acts 7:54). Then Stephen claimed to be having a vision of the Son of Man standing in the heavens (Acts 7:56). This constituted three strikes against Stephen.

In Mark 14:63, the high priest had ripped his garments in protest against blasphemy upon hearing Jesus identify Himself with the coming Son of Man. (See Mark 14:62–64.) When Stephen lifted his eyes and said he saw the Son of Man in the heavens, the hearers covered their ears to spare themselves from hearing “blasphemy.” Then they took Stephen out of the city and stoned him. So overcome with anger were they, that they found their cloaks hindering them from throwing stones as hard as they possibly could. They thus entrusted their cloaks to Saul.

This is a fascinating and telling—if unflattering—first impression of Saul. He was zealous, but he wasn't one of those so overcome with anger he would take the law into his own hands and stone a man without a proper trial. He appeared to be calm and collected. He consented to Stephen's death, but he did not stoop to the level of crowd vigilantism and become an executioner without a legal warrant. Thus our first portrait of Saul is that of a legalistic stickler for law and order. He did not throw stones himself, but he watched the mob's cloaks so the men could throw stones harder and with better aim.

However in Acts 8:3, it seems Saul methodically hunted Christians, chasing them as far north as Damascus in order to arraign them in Jerusalem. With the sweeping powers granted to him, he personally administered beatings; and there is even a hint that, much to his later shame, he put men and women of the Christian community to death (Acts 22:4).

D. Encountered Jesus on the Damascus Road

Saul was indomitable. The early Christians opposed him; then the unbelieving Jews opposed him. The Nabataean King Aretus opposed him; sorcerers opposed him; magistrates, governors, philosophers, silversmiths, and whole cities opposed him. He even found that his own flesh constantly fought against him. Satan buffeted him, his own brethren deserted him, the sea tossed him, snakes bit him, jailers beat him, Christian leaders from Jerusalem undermined him, friends forgot him, and Rome prepared to behead him. No one, though, was able to overcome Saul's will. Except one. While Saul journeyed to Damascus, Jesus met him. Saul walked away from that encounter blind. When he was finally able to see again, he saw the world with new eyes.

E. Was Visited by Ananias

Blind Saul was led to the house of Judas in Damascus. There he had a vision of a Christian, Ananias, perhaps one of the very men Saul was on his way to find and incarcerate. As Saul's vision foretold, Ananias came to Judas's house. Laying hands on Saul, Ananias said, "Brother Saul, the Lord, even Jesus . . . hath sent me, that thou might

receive thy sight and be filled with the Holy Ghost" (Acts 9:17). Saul's sight returned, and Ananias baptized him.

The Christians in Damascus accepted Saul, but when he came to Jerusalem, he was met with deep suspicion. If, however, he was going to fulfill his calling as the apostle to the Gentiles, he was, at some point, going to have to receive the blessing of the mother church—the church at Jerusalem. But this had been the scene of Saul's evil deeds. Citizens of Jerusalem had a good memory, and it was no different with Saul. Not only had he now turned his back on the high priest and the anti-Christian mission, but he somehow had to befriend the people he had recently tried to ruin. He was truly a man without a home. The church with which he needed to establish goodwill was the very church he had deeply offended.

II. BARNABAS'S BACKGROUND

A. His Name Means "Son of Consolation"

The disciples in Jerusalem were rightly skittish about Saul. As mentioned earlier, there were likely Christian men and women in Jerusalem whom Saul had beaten and imprisoned or those who had a relative or friend whom Saul had put to death. Only a man of the highest reputation among them would have been able to assure the Christians that Saul had good intentions. Such was Barnabas.

A man from Cyprus, born of the tribe of Levi, given the name Joseph at birth, the apostles gave him the nickname *Barnabas*, which Luke tells us means "Son of Encouragement" (some translations use the synonymous "Son of Consolation"). The first mention of Joseph "Barnabas" was his going beyond his fellow Christians in their giving by taking the unprecedented step of selling land and laying the proceeds at the apostles' feet. (See Acts 4:36–37.)

B. He Had a Commanding Presence

In the Roman year 761 (our AD 8), Ovid, the great Latin-speaking storyteller and author of the stunningly successful *Metamorphoses*, directed the imaginations of his readers to the distant East.

The old tales he told spread as fast as rumor. He was so deft at his craft that people on both sides of the Mediterranean knew his stories, and to some extent they believed the historicity of his tales. One of his stories tells of a visit the Greek gods Zeus and Hermes (the Romans called them Jupiter and Mercury) made to Phrygia (a territory in southwestern Anatolia, that is, modern Turkey). They came down in the guise of mortal men and beggars. When they knocked on the inhabitants' doors, they were met with a unanimous sentiment: cold indifference. Unable to find shelter in the nicer homes, they came at last to the home of Baucis and Philemon, a poor, middle-aged couple, whom Ovid called "pia" or "pious" (faithful, god-fearing).

Baucis and Philemon, said Ovid, welcomed the beggars. Baucis threw a rough coat over their cold, wet bodies; she cooked the bit of sow that was hang-drying from the rafters; and she seated the visitors at the couple's humble table. When the wine did not run out, the couple learned they were entertaining not mere beggars but gods. The gods blessed them for their kindness to strangers, made them priest of a temple, and flooded the town for its inhospitality. The couple had treated the beggars like gods; therefore the gods treated the lowly couple like exalted priests.

We can't say for certain whether Ovid's story actually generated an expectation of a divine visitation in southwestern Asia Minor or his story merely reflected an already widespread tradition among the backward and superstitious Phrygians. Whatever the case, when Paul and Barnabas were in Lystra (Acts 14), the inhabitants, who had just seen Paul heal a cripple, went into a frenzy. They decked Paul and Barnabas with garlands and lit the sacrificial altars; priests of Zeus scurried out of their temple, shouting, "The gods have come down to us in the likeness of men!"

According to legend, winged Hermes was the swift messenger and interpreter of his father Zeus, the mighty "cloud-gathering," "thunder-wielding" son of Chronos. Believing Paul to be Barnabas's subordinate, the people called Paul "Hermes"; Barnabas, being an impressive and charismatic figure, they assumed was Zeus in human disguise.

C. He Demonstrated Humility

At first, whenever Luke mentioned Barnabas and Saul (Paul) together as missionary partners, he listed Barnabas first: "Barnabas and Saul." (See Acts 11:30; 12:25; 13:2, 7.) Barnabas was the clear leader (the first name in ancient lists usually spoke to its order of prominence). But suddenly everything changed when the two arrived in Paphos, where the country's deputy, Sergius Paulus, witnessed Paul rebuking a magician. As a result, the deputy became a believer. After Sergius Paulus's conversion and Paul's subsequent sermon in Pisidian Antioch, Luke began to invert the order of names to reflect this new reality: "Paul and Barnabas" (Acts 13:43).

However, in the letter the elders of Jerusalem sent with Paul and Barnabas in Acts 15:23-29, the elders still referred to the two in the former way: "It seemed good unto us, being assembled with one accord, to send chosen men unto you with our beloved Barnabas and Paul . . ." In Jerusalem, Barnabas was still considered the authority, but everywhere else, the two were referred to as Paul and Barnabas.

The episode in Lystra is suggestive of the kind of charisma and stature Barnabas seemed to possess. True, Lystrians assumed Paul was Hermes because he was the one who did the speaking. But their legends just as often depicted Zeus as the one who would speak. In fact, in Ovid's tale of Baucis and Philemon only Zeus spoke; Hermes was the silent partner. Even though Paul had spoken the word of power, something told Lystrian eyes that Barnabas was the more likely of the two to be the "cloud-gatherer." They used their mythology to try to interpret and make sense of the present. But not only had they mischaracterized the nature of the two men (they were not Greek gods), but also they had misjudged Paul and Barnabas's relationship.

D. He Was a Lifelong Encourager

Saul was not the only person Barnabas encouraged. He believed in John Mark even when the now not-so-young Paul no longer did. Although John Mark had left Paul and Barnabas on their first missionary journey, Barnabas chose Mark to accompany him when he sailed to Cyprus. Barnabas's instinct

for encouraging young men for the ministry was impeccable. At least fourteen of the twenty-seven books of the New Testament were written by either Paul or Mark—both of whom received the gift of Barnabas’s support and encouragement. This makes Barnabas indirectly responsible for more than half of the New Testament books.

III. TAKING A CHANCE

A. Mediators Are Discerning and Selfless

Mediators take risks. They have no guarantee the person they are taking a chance on will not hurt them in the end. However, Barnabas discerned that Saul’s conversion was real and the zeal and focus he used in persecuting the church could be used in a positive way to further the kingdom of God. When the church at Jerusalem did not believe Saul’s story, Barnabas took up for him and convinced the apostles that Saul had indeed been converted. Barnabas told them how Saul “had preached boldly in Damascus in the name of Jesus” (Acts 9:27). Because the apostles trusted Barnabas, they had faith in what he told them and then were willing to accept Saul.

It has been said that of all the musical instruments there are to master, second fiddle is the most difficult.

On their missionary journey, Barnabas realized Paul would soon take the leading role in their endeavors. Human nature, being what it is, does not often take kindly to going from first to second place. It has been said that of all the musical instruments there are to master, second fiddle is the most difficult. The man who was once mistaken for Zeus in comparison to Paul found himself in the backseat, but he never allowed this development to become a source of contention between them.

Given that Barnabas’s nature was to be an encourager, he was likely happy to see the prominence Paul had achieved in the ministry in such a short time. And Barnabas may have felt a sense of satisfaction in knowing he had played a part in helping Paul to become accepted in his early ministry.

In a similar manner, Barnabas discerned that in spite of John Mark’s leaving before their missionary journey was completed, the young man had great potential. Barnabas was willing to mentor him and help him develop his ministry.

B. Mediators Correct Misconceptions

Young men and women need hours of training for the Christian life. But the value of simple encouragement cannot be overstated. Among the more prominent and public ministries, the ministry of encouragement is often an overlooked and undervalued ministry. In fact, it is often not viewed as an official ministry at all. We all need correction and instruction. But we also need encouragement, that is, to be inspired to take courage and believe that, with God’s help, we are fully capable of exceeding even our own life’s expectations. Mediators not only correct others’ misconceptions about the one they are encouraging, but they also correct young men’s and women’s misconceptions about themselves.

C. Mediators See Results of Mercy

Over the course of years, Barnabas’s “projects” appear together in II Timothy 4:11: “Take Mark, and bring him with thee: for he is profitable to me for the ministry.” Paul, having learned well from Barnabas, was in the middle of encouraging young Timothy when he instructed him to bring Mark along on the journey to visit Paul. We cannot know if Barnabas was still alive at this point, but how proud he would have been to see both generations of his protégés working together for the Christian cause. Paul’s ministry vindicated Barnabas’s early trust in him. And Paul even had to admit Barnabas had been right about Mark.

While we may have those who let us down and take advantage of our trust, the one or two who blossom in response to our faith in them will be well worth the risks we took. A mediator’s trust will eventually be

rewarded, and the reward will far outweigh the disappointments.

INTERNALIZING THE MESSAGE

In his search for wisdom, Job used the idea of a miner in search of precious jewels and metals.

“Surely there is a vein for the silver, and a place for gold where they fine it. Iron is taken out of the earth, and brass is molten out of the stone. . . . The stones of it are the place of sapphires: and it hath dust of gold. . . . He cutteth out rivers among the rocks; and his eye seeth every precious thing. He bindeth the floods from overflowing; and the thing that is hid bringeth he forth to light” (Job 28:1–2, 6, 10–11).

The miner in search of treasure sees “every precious thing” and brings that which is hidden to light. His keen sense for the hidden gem guides him. He says to himself, “Surely there is a vein for the silver.” He goes beyond what human eyes can see. He tunnels deep, treading dangerous paths, hoping to emerge from the darkness with something precious to hold up to the light of day and admire.

And so did Barnabas. He put his reputation on the line when he stood up for Paul; he put his friendship with Paul on the line when he stood up for Mark. Beneath the fierce reputation of Saul and the frightened timidity of Mark, Barnabas saw great-spirited men—men who, if given a measure of trust, would promote and die for the Christian cause.

Perhaps there are individuals in our lives who need someone to see beneath the surface and declare: “Surely there is a vein for the silver!” ■

REFLECTIONS

- Has someone been a “Barnabas” to you? Discuss your experience.
- Have you been a “Barnabas” to someone?
- Is there anyone the Holy Spirit is prompting you to take under your wing and mentor?
- In light of the fact that being able to persuade members of the community to trust someone like a Saul of Tarsus or a Mark requires the community to trust you first, how important is building and maintaining a solid reputation within the community?
 - Jesus is our great mediator. He died for us while we were yet sinners. How does our role as mediators echo Christ’s mediatorial ministry?