

BARNABAS, ‘SON OF ENCOURAGEMENT’

“But Barnabas took him and brought him to the apostles. He told them how Saul on his journey had seen the Lord and that the Lord had spoken to him, and how in Damascus he had preached fearlessly in the name of Jesus.” —ACTS 9:27

When Paul first came to Jerusalem after his conversion in Damascus and subsequent stay in Arabia, the apostles were reluctant to trust him or even meet with him. They had last known him to have brought havoc in Jerusalem, and their relief that he had left them three years ago had only been tempered by the fact he had set off for Damascus to cause trouble to believers there. But then back in Jerusalem, they heard rumours from Damascus that said, “The man who formerly persecuted us is now preaching the faith he once tried to destroy” (Galatians 1:23).

Clearly, the apostles found it difficult to attach much credibility to the story, for when Paul returned, Acts 9:26 says, “They were all afraid of him, not believing that he really was a disciple.” If any credibility was to be established, someone would have to go out on a limb, and that someone was Barnabas. His real name was Joseph, but the disciples most appropriately nicknamed him ‘Barnabas’, meaning ‘son of encouragement’.

Barnabas not only befriended Paul, but became his spokesman, persuading the disciples that he could be trusted. Having gained acceptance, Paul was at liberty to preach in Jerusalem, but with an entirely different message, which did not impress his former colleagues

who were anti-Christian. There was a threat to his life, so it was decided Paul should leave Jerusalem and return to Tarsus. In the meantime, marvelous growth was taking place in the church in Judea and surrounding areas. Most significant was the conversion to Christ of both Jew and Gentile in the city of Antioch, 400 miles north of Jerusalem.

Barnabas, needing help in Antioch, sought out Paul and brought him back from Tarsus. Acts 11:24 says of Barnabas, “He was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and faith, and a great number of people were brought to the Lord.” What higher and nobler aspiration could anyone have? Barnabas looked for opportunities to bring younger men into the work of God. He was not feathering his own nest, or establishing a reputation, but was caught up exclusively in the interests of Jesus Christ, and therefore, Jesus Christ’s interest in the younger Paul became Barnabas’ interest too.

How much Paul owed to the outstanding friendship of Barnabas, we can only surmise, but from every human standpoint, had there been no Barnabas, there would have been no Paul - certainly not as we know him. The point is that we all need a ‘Barnabas’ in our work with God, and God most assuredly provides them.

PRAYER: Thank you, Jesus, for being sensitive and responsive to all our needs. I am so grateful for the ‘Barnabas’ You provide for me.

TO REFLECT UPON: Am I encouraging others in their walk with God?