

SESSION 2

Encourage



QUESTION 1:

When have you crossed paths with a natural encourager?

THE POINT

Encouragement strengthens relationships.

THE PASSAGES

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

THE BIBLE MEETS LIFE

We've been encouraged since we were kids to take our vitamins. And so we do. Since the 1940s, Americans have been popping multivitamins in their mouths every day. We know we need these important vitamins and minerals, and even though a healthy diet is likely to give us all we need, half of us go the extra step and buy multivitamins or supplements.¹

A daily dose is good for us.

We could use a “daily dose” of something else, too. Let's call it a spiritual and emotional vitamin: the vitamin of encouragement. We were created to live in relationship with others, and we hunger for the affirmation of others. We need a healthy supply of encouragement from others in order to grow as God intends.

Just ask any athlete about the benefit they gain when they have the “home field advantage.” Encouragement gives us a boost. Unfortunately, too many of us face a deficiency in this area. Our lives can grow weak without encouragement. And so can our relationships.

Barnabas was a natural encourager. His life challenges us to be a source of encouragement to others. We support the other person and strengthen our relationship when we look for ways to offer encouragement.

Acts 9:26-28

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.

My four children were shooting hoops in the driveway when they asked good ol' dad to supply some pointers on proper form. I racked my brain to remember junior high drills as I gave my best lecture on the mechanics of a free throw. Following my two-minute speech, those four kids stood staring blankly at me. My daughter assumed the role of spokesperson: "Could you, like, show us what you're talking about, Dad?" When I turned and took a shot, their confusion vanished and the game resumed.

Most times, the simplest way to learn is to watch someone. As the old adage goes, some things are more caught than taught. And Barnabas is someone worth watching. We'll let him serve as our encouragement coach, because by his example, he showed us three ways we can encourage others.

Encourage acceptance.

Barnabas first popped up in Scripture as Joseph of Cyprus (Acts 4:36). The apostles had given him the nickname "Barnabas," which means "the son of consolation." Apparently, this man had developed a sterling reputation of building others up with loving words, generous acts, and even affirming looks. When people in the early church thought of an encourager, they thought of Barnabas, and the nickname stuck.

In Acts 9, God used Barnabas to bring Saul to a place of prominence. The apostles may not have rejected Saul outright, but they certainly kept their distance. Based on his past record, Saul was not the kind of person a Christian would want to be around. Christians were known to end up in trouble—or dead!—when Saul came around (Acts 26:9-11). Even though Saul’s heart had been changed completely after he had a personal encounter with Jesus, the believers in Jerusalem didn’t dare trust him.

Barnabas, however, realized Saul was a changed man. He saw Saul as a man truly changed by the shed blood of Christ. Therefore, Barnabas stuck his neck out and vouched for Saul. He encouraged the apostles to reconsider their skepticism and to take a risk on this guy. The disciples may not have trusted Saul, but they did trust Barnabas; so they opened the door and their hearts to Saul, and he soon became a dominant force in spreading the gospel.

Imagine how different your faith would be if Saul had been rejected by the disciples. Had Barnabas taken the easy road, cowering in fear and refusing to endorse Saul, a large section of the New Testament would not exist. Saul would become Paul, the great apostle who was called by God to carry the gospel to the Gentiles and was inspired by God to write thirteen of the books in the New Testament. Without Paul, the second half of Acts simply falls off into the sea. Through this man, the missionary zeal of the church was produced. Through the ministry of this one man, the gospel of Christ made it to Rome and western civilization.

Do you think Barnabas had any hint of the magnitude of Saul’s soon-to-be ministry? It’s possible, but it doesn’t seem likely. Barnabas was likely just doing what he had always done: helping a fellow believer to take the next step in his spiritual growth. When he sniffed potential in somebody, he pulled that person up and encouraged him in Jesus. Without Barnabas, it’s likely that Saul would have remained only a small bud in the blossoming ministry of the church. But God used an encourager to help Paul’s ministry flower into greatness.

Is someone in your life starving for encouragement? Can you think of a person “on the fringe” that could use an invitation into your circle of influence? You may never know the difference you make in another’s life when you simply extend the hand of fellowship and invite him or her into your world.

QUESTION 2:

What risks do you take when you endorse an outsider?

Acts 11:21-24

21 And the hand of the Lord was with them: and a great number believed, and turned unto the Lord.

22 Then tidings of these things came unto the ears of the church which was in Jerusalem: and they sent forth Barnabas, that he should go as far as Antioch.

23 Who, when he came, and had seen the grace of God, was glad, and exhorted them all, that with purpose of heart they would cleave unto the Lord.

24 For he was a good man, and full of the Holy Ghost and of faith: and much people was added unto the Lord.

Encourage growth.

Barnabas encouraged believers to accept another believer, and he also encouraged believers to grow spiritually. In Acts 11, Barnabas returned to the stage. This time, he was commissioned by the apostles in Jerusalem to travel three hundred miles north to Antioch. Many Jews in Antioch embraced Christianity, and the believers had begun to spread the message to Gentiles as well. As a result, Greeks in the region were coming to faith in Christ.

When the apostles got wind of the astonishing harvest, they sent Barnabas to assess the situation and to report what God had done.

Examine the beautiful picture Luke, the writer of Acts, painted of Barnabas's ministry. Because of persecution, believers had scattered, so that the kingdom of God advanced wherever they went. So as soon as Barnabas saw what God was doing, "[he] was glad, and exhorted them all, that with purpose of heart they would cleave unto the Lord." Barnabas surely strengthened these new saints enormously as he drove home the power of perseverance. While the believers surely welcomed his words and received them with joy, the future would require resolve, as the church would be challenged by persecution and famine. To be a Christian was to accept the road of suffering, but it was a journey they could make with joy. Barnabas did more than pay lip service to the joy of knowing Jesus; he embodied it. His message and his conduct were in sync: "For he was a good man, and full of the Holy Ghost and of faith."

When I was fresh out of college, I was sure I knew it all. That diploma on the wall was a regular reminder that I had arrived. What I didn't realize at the time, however, is that maturity takes place over time. Knowledge must be accompanied by experience, and we will find no short cuts to growth.

Like those untested disciples in Antioch, I was unaware of the tests and challenges that were soon to come. Soon after graduation came grief from a broken engagement, life-changing illnesses that affected my family, and waves of doubt as I struggled to discern God's will. My journey involved many unforeseen detours. Every Christian could tell of similar experiences, but herein lies the power of the encourager. As faith begins to falter and growth comes to a standstill, God can send along an encourager to rekindle our passion. God sends "a good man, and full of the Holy Ghost and of faith."

Kent came into my life and breathed fresh wind into my sails. Kent was a middle-aged man, mature in Christ, and growing by leaps and bounds. He took an interest in me and intentionally invested his life into mine. Once a week, we met for coffee and confession. He drank coffee; I confessed. With love and loyalty, he stood with me and challenged me to be stouthearted even in my struggle. It's hard to imagine where I would be today had the Lord held back my Barnabas. Kent was a great encouragement to me.

Perhaps you are in a season when you are starving for a good word from a friend. Do you have someone who breathes fresh wind into your sails, who sees your potential and pushes you to grow? If not, pray that the Lord would bring that person into your life. Conversely, be that person in someone else's life. Is there a person in your life who seems to be sinking or withering? Be a Barnabas and begin the process of investing in another person.

QUESTION 3:

How can we intentionally grow into the role of an encourager?

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.

Encourage service.

- ▶ “Wow, you’re really gifted with kids!”
- ▶ “You made my week with that beautiful song!”

- ▶ “How did you learn to teach the Bible so well?”
- ▶ “My college student can’t wait to walk in and talk to you each week!”
- ▶ “Have you ever thought about leading a small group of your own? When you speak, people listen.”
- ▶ “You make delicious desserts. If you charged, I would pay.”
- ▶ “Your home feels so warm when we arrive each week. Thanks for preparing the space and making us feel so welcomed.”

Has anyone ever said things like this to you? These little statements may not sound like much, but over time, a plant grows tall through regular watering—and a believer grows strong through regular encouraging. The church of Jesus Christ should be the most encouraging place on earth. Homes committed to Christ should be greenhouses of growth for young children coming up in them. Good words encourage growth. And they should encourage others to step up and serve.

As the church in Antioch began to blossom, Barnabas went to fetch Saul from Tarsus. We don’t know what Barnabas said to Saul, but He brought Saul to Antioch to serve, to do what God had gifted him to do.

QUESTION 4:

What are some things that might get in the way of people using their spiritual gifts in the church?

At one time, Barnabas had served as a mentor to Saul, “watering” him with encouragement and watching him grow up in the faith. Now Saul had developed to the point of being Barnabas’s peer in ministry, so that the two became a formidable force for discipleship. “And it came to pass, that a whole year they assembled themselves with the church, and taught much people.” Revival was evident as Saul and Barnabas rightly leveraged life-giving words. Saul served because he was obedient to the call of God and Barnabas encouraged him in his work.

But Barnabas did not just use words to encourage Saul's ministry and teaching. He also encouraged through his actions: he served alongside Saul. Our own actions and examples can be great encouragements for others to step up and use the gifts and skills God has given them.

Barnabas lived out the charge in Hebrews 10:24: "And let us consider one another to provoke unto love and to good works." Be encouraged to follow his example and do the same.

QUESTION 5:

What are some ways we can encourage others to serve in our church?

ENGAGE

List a specific way you could encourage the following people this week. Circle one that you will prioritize in the next few days.

Neighbor:

Coworker:

Friend:

Family member:

Fellow church member:

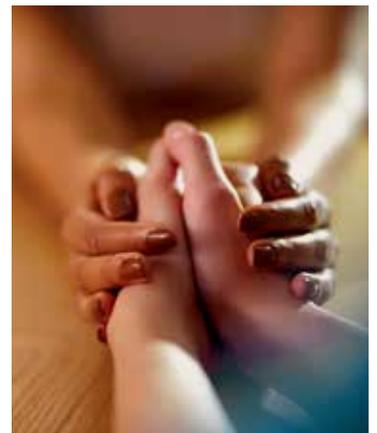
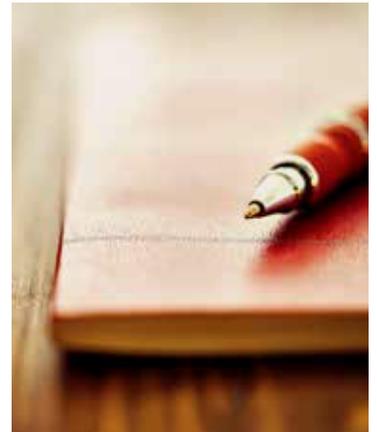
Clerk at the store:

Another person in your sphere of influence:

LIVE IT OUT

How can you strengthen your relationships through encouragement?

- ▶ **Express thanks.** Express thanks to someone who has been an encouragement to you. Be specific regarding how their words or actions helped you.
- ▶ **Evaluate your life.** Consider whether people are encouraged by your example or actions. Consider what you might need to change to be an encourager like Barnabas.
- ▶ **Encourage each other.** Share ways each person in the group lives out one or more of the character traits in the fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22-23).



END NOTES

1R. L. Bailey et al, "Dietary supplement use in the United States," *National Center for Biotechnology Information*, December 22, 2010, <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/21178089?dopt=Abstract>.