

Barnabas - Volume 3

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Preface

This is the third *Sound Words* volume on the life and ministry of Barnabas. We have already seen what a faithful servant of the Lord he was, and how prepared he was to engage in the missionary task of Church planting with the Apostle Paul. There is always the danger, when we consider such servants of God, to imagine that they were somehow perfect in every way, but that of course is not true of anyone except the Lord Jesus Christ himself. Barnabas likewise was not a perfect man even though he was a very good and godly man, and this will come out towards the end of this book. And we know that whatever is recorded for us in Scripture is intended for our profit so that we can learn from it.

Again I am indebted to Ron Low whose notes for the series of radio programmes he recorded on the life of Barnabas are the basis of this book. You will gain the most from this book if you first read the section of the Bible which you

will find at the beginning of each chapter, and if you pray to the Lord to teach you from his Word.

Derek French
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Chapter 1: Barnabas and Paul Face Conflict Over Circumcision – Acts 15:1 – 3

Having returned from their first missionary journey, Barnabas and Paul reported on their labours to their Church at Antioch from where they had been sent on this work by the Holy Spirit. They resumed their ministry in Antioch and stayed there for a long time.

1) False Teachers.

All seemed to be going well when a group of men arrived from Judea. Who they were, how many there were and what their background was we do not know, but from the context it would seem they were public teachers. On their arrival at Antioch, they raised a controversial issue in Acts 15:1:

“Unless you are circumcised, according to the custom taught by Moses, you cannot be saved.”

This teaching was given to the brothers, which included converted Jews and Gentiles. Their teaching was very

strong and powerful, for it did not say ‘you ought to be circumcised according to the custom of Moses’, but *“unless you are circumcised ... you cannot be saved.”* That was a very serious thing to say because it undermined all that the gospel of Christ is about. We are to believe in him alone for salvation and not add anything else. They were teaching that believing in the Lord Jesus Christ as Saviour is inadequate, adding that a person must also keep and obey the Law of Moses to be saved. When Barnabas and Paul went out preaching the gospel it was to tell men and women that salvation was found through faith in Christ alone and nothing extra. Christ had perfectly accomplished all that was necessary to secure salvation through his life and death on the cross and glorious resurrection.

2) An immediate response.

We read in verse 2 that:

“This brought Paul and Barnabas into sharp dispute and debate with them.”

Clearly this false teaching produced great concern, especially among the Gentiles who had been received into the church without conforming to the ceremonial law. Barnabas and Paul disagreed strongly with these men from Judea.

The church at Antioch decided that the best course of action was for Barnabas and Paul to travel up to Jerusalem, accompanied by some other believers from the church, to

see the apostles and elders and have this whole matter discussed fully with them. Remember these false teachers had come from Judea, even possibly Jerusalem, so by consulting with the apostles and elders at the church in Jerusalem, their authority to teach such things could be verified or shown to be false.

This did not imply any uncertainty over the position Barnabas and Paul had taken because they knew wholeheartedly that Christ was sufficient to save all who trust him without any additions wherever they came from (see Galatians 5:1-6; Galatians 2:15-20). It required absolutely nothing else to be added to it.

We learn from this how we must always be ready to contend earnestly for the faith. We read in Jude verse 3:

“Dear friends, although I was very eager to write to you about the salvation we share, I felt I had to write and urge you to contend for the faith that was once entrusted to the saints.”

The only way in which we can deal with error is to oppose it with the truth. If controversy does arise over truth and error, we should not be afraid to seek help from other well-established and spiritually minded believers, which is what was done in Antioch. We read in Acts 15:3:

“The church sent them on their way, and as they travelled through Phoenicia and Samaria, they told

how the Gentiles had been converted. This news made all the brothers very glad.”

As they journeyed towards Jerusalem, we read that they passed through Phoenicia and Samaria. Phoenicia was a narrow strip of seacoast north of Judea, including Tyre and Sidon. As they made this journey they did not waste any opportunity but met with groups of believers in these provinces. Their theme was the conversion of the Gentiles; that God had, through the preaching of the good news of Jesus Christ, turned men and women from the worship of idols and the service of Satan, to the only true and living God. The response to this report was that:

“This news made all the brothers very glad.”

Perhaps the believers in Samaria would have been reminded of their own conversion and of the great joy which they experienced at that time (see Acts 8:5-8). It must have been so encouraging for Barnabas and Paul to observe the joyful response from the believers in these provinces.

3) Lessons to apply.

This incident teaches us:

- (i) It is always good when we can show our support and concern for those called to serve the Lord in the ministry or in missionary work.

- (ii) Like Barnabas and Paul, we should use every opportunity to speak of the Lord and tell what he is doing. This will encourage our faith and bring glory to God, especially when there is news of conversions to Christ.

Reader, is this true of you? Do you rejoice when you hear news of new believers? If you are not yet a believer, then why not come to the Lord Jesus now and experience this joy for yourself?

Chapter 2: Barnabas and Paul Arrive In Jerusalem – Acts 15:4 - 6

In Acts 15:4 we read of the arrival of Barnabas and Paul at Jerusalem.

“When they came to Jerusalem, they were welcomed by the church and the apostles and elders, to whom they reported everything God had done through them.”

This gathering is often referred to as the Jerusalem Council.

1) Declaring what God had done.

Barnabas and Paul had travelled a distance of around 330 miles or 530 kilometres. The words *‘they were welcomed’* mean they were welcomed or received gladly. Here surely is one of the blessings of fellowship, that when we meet

other believers in the Lord, there is true gladness, warmth and love (see Hebrews 10:23-25).

It is generally agreed that this visit to Jerusalem by Barnabas and Paul is that referred to by Paul in Galatians 2. Now if this were so, then the apostles who they met were James, Peter and John, as we read in Galatians 2:9:

“James, Peter and John, those reputed to be pillars gave me and Barnabas the right hand of fellowship when they recognised the grace given to me.”

This passage reminds us that the blessings of fellowship are two-way. We receive but we also give, and here in the latter part of Acts 15:4 we read what Barnabas and Paul gave to the friends at Jerusalem:

“they reported everything God had done through them.”

Fellowship is sharing together of God’s love and goodness, and it’s also sharing together of this work in and through us, which brings him honour and praise (see Psalm 126:3 and Ephesians 1:3 for similar records of God’s goodness to his children).

There are three lessons to note from what we have considered so far:

- (i) We should thank the Lord constantly for safety in travel.

(ii) Let us always be on the look out to welcome and receive our brothers and sisters in Christ who may visit us from other places. Remember we all belong to the one family of believers, those redeemed by the precious blood of Christ.

(iii) Let us never be afraid to tell others the great things that God has done for us. This brings glory to God and is such an encouragement to others when we do.

2) The problem was shared.

The problem over which they came to seek advice was brought to the fore quite quickly. We read in verse 5:

“Then some of the believers who belonged to the party of the Pharisees stood up and said, ‘The Gentiles must be circumcised and required to obey the law of Moses.’”

Part of Barnabas’ and Paul’s report in verse 4 would have included the fact that many Gentiles had believed and been received into Christ’s kingdom through faith in him. These Pharisees were siding with those men who had gone to Antioch, and whom Barnabas and Paul opposed. We know that the Pharisees, of which Paul was one in his earlier life, were very strict and dogmatic in their observance of the law given by the Lord to Moses and the children of Israel. It is sad but these particular men who were professing converts to Christ were more concerned with the externals: circumcision and obedience to the law, than with a

person's heart relationship to God. We see the issues very clearly from what Paul later wrote about himself in Philippians 3:4-6:

“If anyone else thinks he has reasons to put confidence in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; in regard to the law, a Pharisee, as for zeal, persecuting the church, as for legalistic righteousness, faultless.”

Immediately following this description of his life as a Pharisee and before he became a Christian believer, he tells us he counted all he had done as worthless compared with knowing Jesus Christ as his Saviour. We read in Philippians 3:7-9:

“But whatever was to my profit I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. What is more, I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them rubbish, that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ – the righteousness that comes from God and is by faith.”

It is no wonder that Barnabas and Paul opposed these professed believing Pharisees when they said that circumcision and obedience to the law were necessary, along with faith in Christ for salvation. And just in case

we have not seen the issues clearly this is what Paul wrote in Galatians 2:16:

“...know that a man is not justified by observing the law, but by faith in Jesus Christ. So we, too, have put our faith in Christ Jesus that we may be justified by faith in Christ and not by observing the law, because by observing the law no-one will be justified.”

The issue being raised was of crucial importance, and it presents us with two important lessons:

- (i) First, we must beware that any prejudice we may have held against other people before coming to faith in Christ is not to be continued. When we become believers we are all one in Christ, so such divisions are not to be seen amongst the people of God. In the world there are huge divisions over things such as race, education, colour, gender, wealth, religion, and these are done away with once someone becomes a true believer in Christ.
- (ii) We should not be surprised if people want to add some religious customs or rites to basic faith in Christ. Men always want to feel they can justify themselves before God by what they have done, or what has been done externally to them. We must resist all such suggestions. Salvation is found through faith in Christ alone. He is the all sufficient Saviour.

3) The problem was carefully considered.

We read in Acts 15:6:

“The apostles and elders met to consider this question.”

It would have been so easy for them to give their judgement separately, but they came together so that they could listen to each other’s comments on this important issue as they considered this matter. It is also worth observing that this consultation was made up of both apostles and elders. Here we see true spiritual humility, love and wisdom. It would have been easy for the apostles to have met together to consider this matter among themselves. Instead, they recognised that the Lord had also raised up within the church elders who were overseers of God’s people and teachers of God’s Word. Hence both groups came together, apostles and elders to consider this matter. (See Proverbs 11:14 for the benefits of such consultation.)

There are very practical lessons from this for us:

- (i) If the Lord has gifted you in some way or given you a position of responsibility in your local church, then never despise others who do not possess the same gifts or occupy a similar position.
- (ii) Let us never be afraid to consult spiritually minded people within the church on matters which might be sensitive or potentially damaging.

- (iii) Let us never be hasty in arriving at a decision. If the issue is serious, we must be prepared to take time and prayerfully and lovingly consider all the factors and see what God’s Word has to say about the matter. Sometimes there are those who are naturally timid and shy, but may have great spiritual wisdom; so let us encourage them. (See 1 Corinthians 3:9.)

Chapter 3: Peter’s Speech at the Jerusalem Council – Acts 15:7 - 11

The section in Acts 15:6-21 covers the meeting of the Jerusalem council and is composed of three reports or speeches: Peter’s speech in verses 7-11, Barnabas and Paul’s speech in verse 12 and James’ speech in verses 13-21. We plan to examine each of these speeches over the next few chapters and start now with Peter’s speech in verses 7-11. It seems clear from reading the first part of verse 7 where it says, *“after much discussion...”* that this issue was causing some dispute or difference between those assembled. It is into this delicate situation that Peter speaks.

1) Peter’s approach.

Peter then stood up and began to make his speech by addressing the council as *“Brothers”* and we see in what he said a real example of the grace of God. By calling them all brothers Peter was placing himself on the same

level as them, even though he could have claimed, “I am an apostle so have more authority than some of you.” He was very gracious indeed. Peter went on to describe how the Lord had chosen him for a special task in Acts 15:7:

“You know that some time ago God made a choice among you that the Gentiles might hear from my lips the message of the gospel and believe.”

Peter is here relating his experience recorded in Acts chapter 10, when he was staying in the house of Simon, a tanner at the seaside port of Joppa. There he fell into a trance and saw a large sheet descending to the earth in which were all kinds of animals, birds and insects. He was told: “*Get up, Peter, kill and eat*”, but Peter said: “*Surely not, Lord! I have never eaten anything impure or unclean.*” But the voice said: “*Do not call anything impure that God has made clean.*” This happened three times. Just then, three men sent by Cornelius arrived at Simon’s house inquiring about Peter. When Peter met with them and heard why they had come, he travelled with them and entered the home of Cornelius. There he spoke with the assembled company and proclaimed the gospel to them, with the result that many believed in Jesus and were baptised who formally had been Gentiles. How the grace of God is seen in choosing Peter to serve him. Remember Peter, who had denied the Lord, had now been used to bring the gospel to Gentiles and to see them saved. This has been a great comfort to so many of the Lord’s people down the ages because we have all failed the Lord and on many occasions, but he is gracious not only to forgive us

when we repent but also to continue to use us in his service. We also see the grace of God in saving Gentiles like Cornelius. This incident in Acts 10, referred to here by Peter in verse 7, was the first occasion when Gentiles were converted and added to the church. As we know, the Jews were God’s chosen people, through whom the Messiah came into this world, and therefore the early church was composed mainly of Jewish believers or Jewish proselyte believers. But now we see the grace of God in saving Gentiles, which was promised many times throughout the Old Testament (see Psalm 117:1-2 and Isaiah 60:3).

There are two basic lessons concerning the grace of God that we need to learn:

- (i) Everyone who has been brought to know the Lord Jesus Christ and experience the joy of sins forgiven should bless and praise God for his saving grace.
- (ii) A believer who may have fallen away or denied the Lord, can still by the grace of God, be restored, not only to the joy of sins forgiven but into a position of usefulness in the Lord’s service. (Another example of this is seen in David’s prayer after he had fallen into very serious sin. See Psalm 51:12-13.)

2. Peter’s powerful argument.

We read in Acts 15:8-9:

“God, who knows the heart, showed that he accepted them by giving the Holy Spirit to them, just as he did to us. He made no distinction between us and them, for he purified their hearts by faith.”

Peter began by informing the council, that the God who had shown his grace to the Gentiles *“knows the heart”*, which means he knows the truth about our spiritual condition, what we are like on the inside. Since God knew the hearts of these Gentiles and knew they had really believed the gospel, and trusted in the Lord Jesus, as proof of the genuineness of their salvation he gave them the Holy Spirit, in a similar way to that received by the apostles on the day of Pentecost. Peter made it abundantly clear in verse 9 that God made no difference or distinction between those Gentiles who had believed and those Jews who believed. He had worked within them in a similar way even though the Gentile believers were not circumcised.

The lessons for us are as follows:

- (i) We are reminded the Lord knows those who are his (see 2 Timothy 2:19). He knows if our hearts are clean or still stained by sin. We may deceive others; we cannot deceive him.
- (ii) All who are saved will be dealt with by God on the same basis. No people group is favoured above another. In Acts 20:21 we read:

“I have declared to both Jews and Greeks that they must turn to God in repentance and have faith in our Lord Jesus Christ.”

- (iii) Everyone born again receives the Holy Spirit at conversion. Romans 8:9 and 16 tell us that:

“If anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to Christ...”
“The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God’s children.”

3. Peter’s conclusion.

We read what he said in Acts 15:10-11:

“Now then, why do you try to test God by putting on the necks of the disciples a yoke that neither we nor our fathers have been able to bear? No! We believe it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved, just as they are.”

Peter challenged those Pharisees who claimed to be believers but wished to add the keeping of the law to faith in Christ, that they were testing or tempting God. Even throughout the history of the people of Israel, the keeping of the whole law was something which they had found to be impossible, due to their sin and disobedience. So now, when God’s revelation had declared faith in Jesus Christ as the only way by which men and women could be saved, it was unthinkable, unreasonable and unnecessary for

anything else to be added to Christ's once for all, finished work. If the people of Israel had found law keeping impossible to bear, was it not now unjust to expect Gentile believers to be burdened with laws and regulations which had been fulfilled in Jesus Christ? Peter was emphatic on the generosity of God.

The gospel the Gentiles heard preached, was the gospel of the grace of God and that all who repented of their sins and believed in the Lord Jesus as Saviour, were truly saved. If the Gentiles had been saved without the necessity of keeping the whole law, then Jewish believers would be saved the same way. We may say, therefore, that the generosity of God is seen in these verses by his willingness to save anyone, apart from the works of the law. Paul outlines this for us in great detail in Romans 3:19-26:

“Now we know that whatever the law says, it says to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be silenced and the whole world held accountable to God. Therefore no one will be declared righteous in his sight by observing the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of sin. But now a righteousness from God, apart from law, has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify. This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. God presented him a sacrifice of atonement, through faith in his blood. He

did this to demonstrate his justice, because in his forbearance he had left the sins committed beforehand unpunished – he did it to demonstrate his justice at the present time, so as to be just and the one who justifies the man who had faith in Jesus.”

Justification by the keeping of the law was not possible, but justification by grace through the redemption in Christ Jesus, is what is available to both Jews and Gentiles. As we think of the generosity of God there are three lessons for us to take on board:

- (i) God's willingness to save depends not on our background, but on his love and grace.
- (ii) All who are saved are received in exactly the same way, which is through the shed blood of the Lord Jesus Christ. This means we cannot boast or claim any superiority of spiritual birth over another brother or sister. We are *“all one in Christ Jesus”*.
- (iii) Any additional humanly devised burden or duty is totally unnecessary as far as our justification before God is concerned. We cannot add to what Christ has already done, and therefore we should not insist that others obey our rules and regulations.

The only thing we must do and teach to all who believe on the Saviour is to live a life worthy of the Lord, walking day by day in obedience to God's Word and to grow in holiness and Christ likeness. May this be our desire and aim.

Chapter 4: Barnabas' And Paul's Speech at the Jerusalem Council – Acts 15:12

The second speech made to the Council, this time by Barnabas and Paul, is summarised for us in verse 12:

“The whole assembly became silent as they listened to Barnabas and Paul telling about the miraculous signs and wonders God had done among the Gentiles through them.”

Barnabas and Paul were quite different individuals from different backgrounds yet the Lord used them both. They both worked hard for the Lord over an extended period of time. They do set a wonderful standard for us to follow. The one thing which stands out very clearly is that Barnabas and Paul were concerned solely for the glory of God. Wherever they went it was the Lord they spoke about. Again and again we see how they were ready to admit they were but men, and always desired to ascribe the glory to the Lord for anything accomplished through their preaching ministry or labours. We must add that if the Lord would use us, then we too must be devoted to him and his glory.

As they reported what God had done through them they were outlining what had taken place on their missionary journey described in Acts 13 and 14. The Lord had used Barnabas and Paul as his instruments whom he had gifted, but it was he who did the work. Remembering this helps to keep us from becoming proud and exalting men, and

centres everything on the Lord. The miraculous signs and wonders performed in the book of Acts were for the glory of God and the vindication of the gospel of Christ. The reason why they referred to these miracles here at the Jerusalem Council was directly related to the issue they were discussing, namely, whether or not Gentile believers should be circumcised and obey the Law of Moses to be saved. As Barnabas and Paul recalled all that had happened during their first missionary journey, they emphasised what

“God had done among the Gentiles through them.”

God had saved many people from a Gentile background without any reference to them being circumcised or obeying the law of Moses. Looking through Acts 13 and 14(see Barnabas Volume 1 and 2 for details) we come across phrases such as *“all who were appointed for eternal life believed.”* And *“a great number of Jews and Gentiles believed.”* Here God was working through the preaching of the gospel and saving not just Jews who had known the law, but Gentiles too. And there was not a single instance when any of these Gentile believers were required to submit to the law of Moses in order to be saved. The multitudes God blessed were godless, lawless, heathen Gentiles, but he did bless them and they were added to the churches and became part of the great body of Christ upon earth, the church of God. The strength of all that evidence was fairly compelling and those who were insisting Gentile believers go through circumcision etc., were completely wrong.

From all of this let us learn that when God is pleased to bless the preaching of his Word, he reaches over all religious barriers. He can save a godless and idolatrous Gentile as well as he can save a religious, zealous Pharisee like Paul. God is not hindered by social barriers either, because he can save helpless cripples and high flying governors like Sergius Paulus. Educational barriers are no problem to the Lord either, because he can save an illiterate person who can neither read nor write and a university professor. Even ethnic barriers and colour barriers which men sadly and sinfully erect are also no hindrance to the Lord in saving his people from their sins. Throughout history, God has blessed multitudes from every walk of life.

As we close this chapter, there are some very important questions we need to ask ourselves. Has God blessed you with his salvation? Do you know your sins are forgiven? Do you have peace with God? Do you know you are bound for heaven? You may think other questions are more important, but what is more important than the destiny of your eternal soul? Ask God now to bless you with the blessing of sins forgiven by turning in repentance and faith to the Lord Jesus Christ.

Chapter 5: James' Speech at the Jerusalem Council – Acts 15:13-21

We come now to consider the speech made by James in Acts 15:13-21. This James was the brother of the Lord

Jesus who is referred to by Paul in Galatians 1:19. He seems to have become a prominent leader in the Jerusalem Church because earlier in Acts 12:17 when Peter had been miraculously released from prison in Jerusalem he said, *“Tell James and the brothers about this.”* Interestingly he was not one of the twelve disciples of Jesus, and indeed, when we first learn about the brothers of Jesus, he was like the rest of them, an unbeliever. We discover this in John 7:5 where we read,

“For even his own brothers did not believe in him.”

However, like the other brothers, he became utterly convinced when Jesus appeared to him after his resurrection. This meeting is referred to in 1 Corinthians 15: 7. Later in Acts 21:18 – 19 he seems to have the role of leader among the elders of the Jerusalem Church. With the gathering of the Council remaining silent James began his speech, and we can divide what he said into four sections.

1) God's power had been at work.

We read in Acts 15:14:

“Simon has described to us how God at first showed his concern by taking from the Gentiles a people for himself.”

James takes as his starting point what Peter had said earlier about God's dealing with the Gentiles. It was not Barnabas

and Paul who first experienced God's power working among the Gentiles, but Peter when he had visited the house of the Gentile Cornelius where many believed on the Lord and were baptised. James is quite clear as he declared how God had taken *"from the Gentiles a people for himself"*. We stress this point because it was only the power of God which could reach ungodly, sinful Gentiles and so change them that they became children of God, and members of the church of Christ. And because it was God who did this then no other human being could question what he had done. This was his work and therefore had to be accepted by the rest of the Lord's people. It is also a reminder that every believer's salvation is a work which God himself has achieved in their lives.

We must ask ourselves if we have experienced this same power of God at work in our own lives? Has he visited you to take you into his family and saved you by his grace? This is something which cannot be achieved by human effort or will or desire. Only the gospel of Christ can change you and make you a new creation, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes.

2) God had planned to save Gentiles.

To support what had taken place when the Lord saved Gentiles through Peter's ministry and also through the ministry of Barnabas and Paul, James now proves that what had happened historically was no after-thought by God but part of his glorious purpose as declared by the Old Testament prophets. James said in verse 15:

"The words of the prophets are in agreement with this, as it is written..."

To illustrate the point, James then quotes from Amos 9:11-12. Now in these verses the Lord gives a promise. James said in verses 16-18:

"After this I will return and rebuild David's fallen tent. Its ruins I will rebuild, and I will restore it, that the remnant of men may seek the Lord, and all the Gentiles who bear my name, say the Lord, who does these things that have been known for ages."

Using this illustration of a tent that had fallen down, God was showing the poor and low condition to which David's family must be reduced before the prophecy could be fulfilled. Then God would raise it up or re-erect this kingdom. James sees this as a reference to the universal church which is a development of the old idea of Israel. He sees this prophecy as the marvellous way by which God would make provision for Gentiles to call on his name. The essential meaning of the passage is that the restoration of the kingdom of David was to be connected with the spiritual conquest of the Gentiles, of those who would seek the Lord and be called by his name. And that is precisely what Peter, Barnabas and Paul had witnessed in their ministries.

How thankful we should be to the Lord for the promises in his Word concerning salvation. How do we know that he

will accept those of us who are Gentiles? It is because he has promised to do so in his Word. But let us make it even more personal. How do I know that the Lord will save me as an individual? Again, it is by the promises in his Word. For example in Romans 10:13 God has promised that:

“Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.”

Also in John 3:16:

“For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.”

God’s promises and prophecies are always fulfilled in detail.

3) God had always planned to save Gentiles.

In verse 18 we read concerning these promises of God about the inclusion of the Gentiles into his kingdom:

“...that they have been known for ages.”

According to the original text, this verse expresses still more strongly and directly than verse 15 the important fact that the reception of the Gentiles into the church was no after-thought or innovation, but a part of the divine plan from the beginning. Right back in eternity God had this plan laid down. That plan was to bring together men and

women from various lands, backgrounds, colours, and nationalities, yes Jews and Gentiles, who would be saved by the sacrificial death and shed blood of the Lord Jesus Christ on Calvary. There are many such passages so we will select a few to consider now.

God’s plan began to be unfolded in Scripture with the promise given to Adam in Genesis 3:15. Addressing the devil, God declared:

“I will put enmity between you and the woman and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel.”

This is the first promise in Scripture of one who would come to defeat Satan, and is a direct prophecy concerning the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ as the Saviour of sinners. Later God promised Abraham in Genesis 22:18:

“Through your offspring all nations on earth will be blessed.”

Then consider Isaiah 42:6-8:

“I, the Lord, have called you in righteousness; I will take hold of your hand. I will keep you and will make you to be a covenant for the people and a light for the Gentiles, to open eyes that are blind, to free captives from prison and to release from the dungeon those who sit in darkness. I am the Lord; that is my name! I will not give my glory to another or my praise to idols.”

In these few Scriptures see a small glimpse of God’s plan unfolded to bring the blessing of his salvation to the Jews first, and then to the Gentiles. He gives, in Genesis, an overall view, but as the Scriptures unfold we find more and more detail being given concerning his plan and how his plan will be worked out through the birth, life, death, resurrection and ascension of the Messiah, the Lord Jesus Christ. God’s plan is not just a general plan looking down the ages, but it concerns you and me as individuals. We read in Psalm 139:13-16:

“For you created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother’s womb. I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made; your works are wonderful, I know that full well. My frame was not hidden from you when I was made in the secret place. When I was woven together in the depths of the earth, your eyes saw my unformed body. All the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be.”

God has a plan for your life and mine. He knows the length of our days upon earth. He knows everything about us. That is why the Psalmist could go on to say in Psalm 139:23-24:

“Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. See if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting.”

As a believer he longed to be obedient and pleasing to God, and surely there is no greater desire than that our lives will bring glory to the Lord.

4) All God’s people must exercise purity.

James spoke about the need for all God’s people to exercise purity in their lives in verses 19-20. As James brought his speech to a conclusion, he was convinced that since God had given his authority that the Gentiles should be saved, as promised by the prophets, therefore no further burden of ritual observation should be added to their salvation in Christ. They had turned to God from false gods, and therefore nothing else was needed. They did not need to be circumcised in order to be saved. And we must say this was a major breakthrough in their understanding of the grace of God in salvation. Salvation was by faith alone and in Christ alone. Nothing else is required. However, in order that the fruit of their repentance be seen in a godless world, James proposed that the Church at Jerusalem wrote to the Church at Antioch with some helpful guide-lines.

First that they should “...*abstain from food polluted by idols*”. This may have a reference to meat, sold in the market place, which had been used in connection with idolatrous heathen worship (see 1 Corinthians 8 and 10).

Second, that they should keep themselves “...*from sexual immorality*”. It is possible that many Gentiles had once engaged in such sin, but such behaviour was now out of the

question, as God required his children to live holy and pure lives.

Third, they should abstain from “...*the meat of strangled animals and from blood*”. The Jews were to kill animals by shedding their blood, and the eating of blood was forbidden. It is accepted by reformed scholars that the reason this regulation was given was merely a temporary expedient for maintaining peace between converted Jews and Gentiles during the interval between the organisation of the Christian church and the annulling of the Jewish one. Since Jews were accustomed to having the law of Moses read in the synagogue every Sabbath, and those Jewish believers were still keen to keep God’s purity as declared in his Word, so Gentile believers should not abuse their exemption from these ceremonial precepts, but in love for their brethren in Christ endeavour to heed God’s Word concerning purity.

One of the evidences that a man or woman has been made “*a new creation in Christ Jesus*” is that they live a holy life. We read in 1 Peter 1:15-16:

“But just as he who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do; for it is written: ‘Be holy, because I am holy.’”

Our bodies are not to be abused or used for immoral purposes, as Paul states in 1 Corinthians 6:19-20:

“Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received

from God? You are not your own; you were bought at a price. Therefore honour God with your body.”

As God is pure and holy, so those who have been called and saved by his grace need to be pure and holy.

Chapter 6: Instructions Sent From the Jerusalem Council – Acts 15:22-29

Having spent much time together discussing the vital matter that Gentile believers did not need to submit to circumcision and the law of Moses to be saved, the council reached their conclusion. They decided that two of their own leading men in the church at Jerusalem, namely Judas (also called Barsabbas) and Silas, should accompany Barnabas and Paul to Antioch, and carry with them a letter from the council. Such a visit from men chosen by the Church at Jerusalem would indicate a brotherly respect for the church at Antioch. Here were two of the leading men from Jerusalem prepared to travel to the sister church at Antioch because they recognised they too were part of the body of Christ. Further, their presence would have helped to reinforce the importance of the message contained in the letter they were taking from the Jerusalem Council. The fact that these two leaders from the Jerusalem church were prepared to accompany Barnabas and Paul to Antioch, showed that they wished to endorse the message contained in the letter. Then in addition to all of this their presence was to demonstrate the ‘oneness’ or ‘unity’ between the churches at Jerusalem and Antioch. These leading men

were not ashamed to associate with other believers from Antioch; but rather it was a great delight for them.

1) The introduction to the letter.

We turn now to the letter sent from the Jerusalem Council in Acts 15:23-29. The letter opens in v23 with these words:

“The apostles and elders, your brothers...”

We could quite easily fail to see the humility portrayed in these words. It would have been so easy for the apostles to have sent a letter from themselves only, since they were in a unique position; but they did not do so. Instead of adopting a superior and autocratic position they show their humility by signifying that the letter comes from all of the church – the apostles, elders and brothers. And again in v23 we see also that the correspondents named expressed a genuine love and humility to those to whom they are writing,

“To the Gentile believers in Antioch, Syria and Cilicia: greetings.”

These words indicated in the simplest and plainest terms that those who had been meeting together in the council at Jerusalem, recognised that those to whom they were writing, were fellow Christians, true believers, brothers and sisters in Christ, disciples of the Lord Jesus. They were all one in Christ Jesus. Hence they desired to express their

love to them by sending greetings. The thought brought out in the word ‘*greetings*’ means to rejoice, to wish them joy. It is rather delightful to see such a loving and caring attitude between these two churches and we must seek to act in a similar manner ourselves (see Philippians 2:3).

2) The content of the letter.

The letter begins in verse 24:

“We have heard that some went out from us without our authorisation and disturbed you, troubling your minds by what they said.”

Having commenced with their ‘greetings’, they straight away deal with the matter which had caused so much trouble and upset in the church at Antioch. You will recall that the basic problem was the teaching put about by some that it was necessary for Gentile believers to be circumcised and to keep the ceremonial law. Now it is obvious from this letter that this teaching had troubled the people a great deal. Their peace was destroyed, they had doubts as to their eternal safety and acceptance in the sight of God, and this had been brought about by teaching given by those from Jerusalem. The effect of this teaching was that their souls were very much unsettled. Such was the serious nature of this false teaching brought by these people from Jerusalem to Antioch, that the believer’s faith, hope and peace had been turned upside down and was in danger of being ruined, or carried off. But the clarification given in this letter is that those who had come from

Jerusalem or Judea had done so without the authority, the command or the blessing of the Church at Jerusalem. They were guilty of gross error and the believers at Antioch were encouraged to recognise them as false teachers and to reject what they were claiming.

We learn from this that we must ensure we have a good, firm and true understanding of God's Word. This will enable us to communicate the truth to others and not that which is false or ruinous, and it will enable us to recognise false teaching when it occurs and to reject it outright. Remember Paul's instructions to younger Timothy in 2 Timothy 2:15:

“Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved ... and who correctly handles the word of truth.”

It is important that those who go out from local churches to preach or speak elsewhere are faithful to the truth of God's Word as taught and preached in those churches. We should be faithful to the Lord, faithful to his Word, and faithful to our local church and its ministry. Remember these false teachers were not sent out by their Church. This is quite different. There is need for accountability by those who claim to be true preachers. Where error or falsehood has been taught, we should seek to bring the true teaching of God's Word to those affected by it. By so doing we will be endeavouring to lead them out of falsehood into truth; out of darkness into light; out of bondage into freedom; out of despair into hope and peace and joy in the Lord. The

Scriptures warn us that we are living in days of great spiritual confusion and falsehood. Let us be men and women who truly know and love the Lord, who desire to obey his Word and seek that through our lives and witness others will be brought to know and trust in the Lord Jesus Christ alone as their Saviour.

Moving on to the next stage in the letter we read in verses 25-26:

“So we all agreed to choose some men and send them to you with our dear friends Barnabas and Paul— men who have risked their lives for the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.”

The council in Jerusalem described why they decided to send Barnabas and Paul back to their own company, accompanied by those two chosen companions from the church at Jerusalem, Judas and Silas. So, unlike the false teachers who had gone out from Jerusalem of their own accord, these two men had the commendation and full support of the Church, and so the Antioch Church could receive them and what they had to say with complete confidence. It is also lovely to see how they had valued Barnabas and Paul as their dear friends, or beloved ones. This was an important confirmation showing how highly and lovingly these two brethren were esteemed by the believers at Jerusalem. Barnabas and Paul had hazarded their lives in the cause of Christ as they had continued to reach out to lost and needy men and women. This is so challenging and the Church at Jerusalem was not slow in

acknowledging this with thankfulness. There is a lovely reflection here of 1 Thessalonians 5:12-13 which reads:

“Now we ask you, brothers, to respect those who work hard among you, who are over you in the Lord and who admonish you. Hold them in the highest regard in love because of their work. Live in peace with each other.”

We need to ask ourselves if we esteem and love our brothers and sisters in Christ in a similar way, and should most certainly love those whose love for Christ and lost men and women have taken the gospel into dangerous and dark places. This should be seen in our regular prayer for them.

The next part of the letter is verse 27:

“Therefore we are sending Judas and Silas to confirm by word of mouth what we are writing.”

Now we see the particular reason why Judas and Silas were chosen to accompany Barnabas and Paul. One thing is clear that both of these men were held in the highest esteem by the church in Jerusalem and were given the privilege and responsibility of travelling with Barnabas and Paul to Antioch to confirm the message contained in the letter. We see that it is good to have information or instructions sent to us by letter, but it is of additional help if those who were present and assisted in putting the

instructions into the letter can come in person to endorse and explain many of the statements.

We come now to the specific commands which this letter contained. We read in verses 28-29:

“It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us not to burden you with anything beyond the following requirements: You are to abstain from food sacrificed to idols, from blood, from the meat of strangled animals and from sexual immorality. You will do well to avoid these things. Farewell.”

As this letter is brought to a conclusion, we find that the views of the Jerusalem council are placed on the very highest level. This is brought out in verse 28 because it says, *“It seemed good to the Holy spirit and to us...”* In other words the views of the council were in accord with what the Holy Spirit required. Now it should be observed that before the commands are specified, it is made clear that they wish *“not to burden you with anything beyond the following requirements”*. How sensitive, loving and considerate are these words to these Gentile believers, in comparison with the heavy, demanding and harsh words spoken by those who came from Judea to Antioch with their false teaching. So having told them that it is only certain requirements that they are specifying, they go on to outline what they are, in verse 29. And there are four things. First they were *“...to abstain from food sacrificed to idols”*. This was specified so that it might not become a

means of offence to others. We read in 1 Corinthians 10:27-28:

“If some unbeliever invites you to a meal and you want to go, eat whatever is put before you without raising questions of conscience. But if anyone says to you, ‘This has been offered in sacrifice,’ then do not eat it, both for the sake of the man who told you and for conscience’ sake – the other man’s conscience, I mean, not yours. For why should my freedom be judged by another’s conscience?”

Second, they were “...to abstain from blood”. This, like the preceding command, was prohibited in the ceremonial law for Jews, and although it is specified here as a command which Gentile believers should obey, it was done so that unity might prevail amongst believers. Third, they were to abstain “...from the meat of strangled animals”. This was also a requirement to be obeyed in Jewish ceremonial law. And finally they were to abstain “...from sexual immorality”. While the preceding commands should be obeyed by Gentile believers at that time, so that they might not give offence to Jewish believers, this final command is one that must be obeyed by all believers at all times.

The letter ended with the statement, “*You will do well to avoid these things*”. This indicated a number of things. First, that their willingness to do these things would be to do what was right and their duty, which would mean they acted acceptably to God. It also meant they would be

doing good and acting favourably towards their Jewish brethren because of their tender care of their weak consciences. Then we can add they would be doing well for themselves because they were acting out of love.

The concluding word to the church is “*Farewell*”. It has the meaning ‘be strong’. By using this term the council at Jerusalem expressed the desire for all the believers at Antioch that they might be strong in the Lord.

There are a number of things we can learn from this whole matter:

- (i) It is vitally important that we know the mind of the Holy Spirit as individuals and in our local churches.
- (ii) We should never seek to burden others with rules or regulations which are not specifically commanded in Scripture.
- (iii) Let us beware that in anything we do or say, we shall not become a hindrance, or give offence or cause others to stumble. 2 Corinthians 6:3 says this:

“We put no stumbling block in anyone’s path, so that our ministry will not be discredited.”

- (iv) May our lives be kept pure and free from the sins which are so prevalent today. 1 Peter 1:16 says:

“Be holy, because I am holy.”

The greatest testimony we can have in the world is a holy life, showing the beauty of Christ. Are you holy? Have your sins been removed and cleansed by the precious blood of Christ? If not, why not?

Chapter 7: Barnabas And Paul Return to Antioch – Acts 15:30 - 32

In our studies on the life of Barnabas, we have reached the point where the letter written by the council of Jerusalem was brought to the believers in Antioch, Syria and Cilicia. This letter clarified the situation concerning Gentile believers, namely that faith in Jesus Christ alone is necessary for salvation without the need to obey the ceremonial law. We read in Acts 15:30:

“The men were sent off and went down to Antioch, where they gathered the church together and delivered the letter.”

This verse has four verbs which tell us how the task was fulfilled. Note first of all they were “*sent off*” which reminds us that the company of believers at Jerusalem did this as a definite act and was something which had the united support of all. The next word to note is the word ‘*went*’. We are told these four men went to Antioch. Having been given the task and responsibility to bring the letter to Antioch, this little group of the Lord’s servants do what the Church asked them to do. We could quite easily overlook this, but it is so important to see that these godly

servants of the Lord gladly submitted to the request to do this task for the Church, and this willing response to help is something which we need to cultivate also. The next word to consider is the word “*gathered*”. They gathered the church together. Since the contents of the letter had been agreed by the gathered company of believers meeting at Jerusalem it was essential that it be delivered, not just to the church leaders, but the whole company meeting at Antioch. Hence on their arrival Barnabas, Paul and their companions gathered the church together. And that leads to the final word which is the word “*delivered*”. They delivered the letter. This of course was the primary purpose of their journey back to Antioch. Here then, we see their task being accomplished in the handing over of the letter to the church.

There are a number of practical lessons for us to apply to our lives today. First, when we are entrusted with a specific task concerning the Lord’s work, let us seek to fulfil our responsibility just like these men did. Second, let us never be content with a half finished job or ministry, but ensure we complete the work which the Lord has given us to do, again exactly as Barnabas and his companions did. Third, we need to thank God not only for this letter which the Church at Antioch received but also for the fact that we now have the completed Word of God delivered to us, and by that of course we mean the Bible. How we need to help and pray for those agencies whose task is to print and distribute God’s Word throughout the world.

We read in Acts 15:31:

“The people read it and were glad for its encouraging message.”

The entire Church at Antioch eagerly listened as the letter was read out so that everyone could hear its content. And their response was one of thankfulness because of its encouraging message. We have to remember the crucial situation facing this church at Antioch as they had conflicting teaching concerning how someone can be right with God. They had listened to Barnabas and Paul tell of Christ’s death for sinners and that in Christ alone salvation was to be found. But then they had also listened to some who had come from Jerusalem who stated that, as well as believing in Christ, they had to be circumcised and obey the ceremonial law, which only served to throw them into confusion. As this letter was read, they realised that faith in Christ alone would justify them before God and not by adding the works of the law. Christ’s sacrifice and the shedding of his blood on the cross were all sufficient for man’s forgiveness and reconciliation to God. Is it any wonder then that they *“... were glad for its encouraging message”*? Let us not forget that these believers in Antioch were converted from an ungodly Gentile background and therefore the message contained in this letter must have thrilled their souls, warmed their hearts and calmed their minds.

There is an old but lovely Christian hymn written by a believer and pastor by the name of Horatius Bonar which really sums it all up for us.

*“Not what my hands have done can save my guilty soul;
not what my toiling flesh has borne can make my spirit whole.
Not what I feel or do can give me peace with God;
not all my prayers and sighs and tears can bear my awful load.*

*Your work alone O Christ, can ease this weight of sin;
your blood alone, O Lamb of God, can give me peace within.
Your love to me, O God, not mine, O Lord, to you,
can rid me of this dark unrest, and set my spirit free.*

*Your grace alone, O God to me can pardon speak;
your power alone, O Son of God, can this sore bondage break.
I bless the Christ of God; I rest on love divine;
and with unfaltering lip and heart, I call this Saviour mine.”*

In Acts 15:32 we read:

“Judas and Silas, who themselves were prophets, said much to encourage and strengthen the brothers.”

The two brethren who preached God’s Word were Judas and Silas. Now we have seen earlier in our studies that both of these men were leaders in the church at Jerusalem,

and now in this verse we see them called ‘prophets’, which means they were inspired teachers or expounders of the divine will. Their foretelling of future events was only part of their ministry. As we think of these two men we can see them to be godly, gifted and gracious servants of God for we read in this verse what they did, namely, they “*said much to encourage and strengthen the brothers*”. As these two dear servants of God preached the Word, they urged, persuaded and encouraged the company of Gentile believers to go on with the Lord. Their objective was that they might be strengthened or confirmed in their faith in Christ, and not find their faith was being undermined which was the problem with the false teachers they had heard. Now whilst we have no detailed account of the Word preached by Judas and Silas, we have a hint in verse 27 that their ministry would be an exposition of the letter as detailed in verses 23 – 29. It seems likely that Judas and Silas would have preached about salvation, which alone was accomplished through the atoning work of Jesus Christ on the cross and is received by faith alone in Christ. There is no doubt they would have declared the necessity for each believer to live a holy life as evidence of God’s gracious work within them. And we are sure they would have stressed the importance of love shown between believers as proof of their oneness in Christ. We do not know how long they preached, but it was long enough for the truth of God’s Word to have its impact on the lives of the Church members. I am sure you have also observed in this verse that Judas and Silas were preaching with a purpose. They were not preaching simply to pass the time, nor to entertain, but with the objective that these believers

would be built up, strengthened and well grounded in the faith and in their love for Christ and for each other, and in their daily walk.

There are three important lessons for us to note:

- a. Preaching is the God given means whereby this Word is communicated, explained and applied to the lives of men and women (see 1 Corinthians 1:21 – 24, and Acts 20:32).
- b. In preaching we must only expound or explain God’s Word. We are not to use preaching as a platform for political views or personal vendettas, or even to bring about social change, but carry out the exhortation given by Paul to Timothy in 2 Timothy 4:2,

“Preach the Word; be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke and encourage with great patience and careful instruction.”

- c. Third, we must always have a goal or purpose in preaching. If the preaching is for unbelievers its aim will be to bring before them their awful state before a Holy God and to show to them the need to repent of their sins, turn to God for mercy and receive by faith the gift of God, eternal life through the Lord Jesus Christ. And if we are addressing believers the purpose will be to establish, strengthen and ground them in the faith and lead them into a closer more holy walk with the Lord, day by day.

Each of us needs to ask if the preaching of God’s Word has been fruitful in our lives. Do you know the joy of sins forgiven and peace with God through Jesus Christ? If not you need to trust in the Lord Jesus today, and if you do know his salvation then rejoice and ask if as a result you have a desire to be established and built up in the faith and to live a life of holiness to the praise and glory of God? May it be so!

Chapter 8: Barnabas And Paul Continuing Ministry In Antioch – Acts 15:33 - 35

Having returned from Jerusalem to Antioch to deliver the letter from the Jerusalem Council, Barnabas and Paul were accompanied by Judas and Silas from the Jerusalem Church. In the previous chapter we saw how the ministry of these two men was such an encouragement to the Antioch believers who were strengthened in their faith as a result. In this chapter we are looking at Acts chapter 15:33-35 which describes the sequel to those events.

1) Christian fellowship expressed.

We are informed in verse 33 that they stayed in Antioch for some time:

“After spending some time there, they were sent off by the brothers with the blessing of peace to return to those who had sent them.”

Here we have these two servants of the Lord, Judas and Silas, not just walking out and going back to their home church when they felt like it, but being sent on their way with the prayerful good wishes and benediction of the church. The phrase “...with the blessing of peace” can be understood in two ways and probably both were intended. Firstly, there was the desire that Judas and Silas would enjoy the Lord’s blessing as they journeyed home and in their ministry. They left the Church under happy circumstances and the believers at Antioch desired that the Lord would grant them his richest blessing. Secondly, there was the desire that the Church at Jerusalem would also know the Lord’s blessing too. We see here a true spirit of love and appreciation from one group of believers to another. It is obvious that the letter sent from Jerusalem and its contents and the encouraging ministry brought by Judas and Silas made a deep impression on the believers at Antioch, so that they wished to reciprocate the greetings and request Judas and Silas to be the carriers of these greetings back to Jerusalem. Reading through the New Testament we find sending such greetings was a regular occurrence, particularly in Paul’s epistles (e.g. see Romans 1:7, 1 Corinthians 1:3). What is important for us to stress is that such words or greetings were far more than merely being a polite way of speaking or writing. These were a real heartfelt and earnest longing for God’s peace and blessing to rest upon those to whom the greetings were sent, that God would prosper them spiritually and their ministries and witness to the world. And it really shows us the close ties of Christian love that existed between the different groups of believers. It is an outworking of the

prayer of Jesus himself in John 17:11 where he asked that God would protect his disciples:

“...so that they may be one as we are one.”

This gives us a rather special challenge in this way. How good are we at returning greetings or expressing appreciation to others for their love and kindness which they have shown to us? Remember the Saviour’s words in Acts 20:35:

“It is more blessed to give than to receive.”

Sadly we live in a very self-centred and selfish world and that can so easily rub off on us. The world and its prevailing attitudes will try to mould us into conformity with its standards and values, which we must resist very strongly. We do need the Lord’s help to maintain our love and unity with all other Christian believers.

Not so very long ago there was one believer who was really struggling with the pressure and temptations that the world so often presents us with, and he was finding it very hard and difficult because certain people were opposing his walk with the Lord. But then he said, “You know, I am so glad for my Church. Whenever I meet with my fellow believers it is like entering a refreshing spiritual oasis in the midst of a world which is like a hard, dry and barren desert.” And by that he meant the love and concern and fellowship and prayers of his fellow disciples of Jesus was something that he had found so beneficial and supportive

for him. This is so good because to be like that is to be like Christ and neither our sinful world nor our enemy the devil want to see that in us. We really do need to pray for the Lord’s grace so that we can imitate this lovely fellowship that existed between these believers in the New Testament.

2) Christian ministry exercised.

We read in Acts 15:35:

“But Paul and Barnabas remained in Antioch where they and many others taught and preached the word of the Lord.”

This is a very useful summary of their activities. So let us ask a double question about them, namely, what did these servants of the Lord do in Antioch and why did they choose to remain there? Let us look at the second question first. It seems likely that Antioch became the hub from which preachers were sent out in various directions with the glorious gospel of redeeming love in Christ Jesus. But it also became a centre where inquiring Gentiles who were anxious to know more of this ‘good news’ could go and be helped. Just as Jerusalem was the hub in bringing the gospel to Jews and Jewish proselytes, so Antioch became the hub from which the gospel went out to the Gentile world. Coming now to the first question, verse 35 has the answer because it tells us they taught the Scriptures and preached. It is very likely that they exercised their Christian ministry both in public and private. One commentator has translated these words as “evangelising

the word of the Lord”. In other words through the proclamation of God’s Word, the good news concerning Jesus Christ who was crucified, was made known to men and women.

We note that Barnabas and Paul were not alone in this task for many others shared in this ministry too. Here were men who had been born again of God’s Holy Spirit, and been called to preach his Word. Preaching and teaching requires preachers and teachers. In addition we see their persistence because we are told they “...remained in Antioch ...” That is they stayed there for quite a while. This tells us this work was no casual pastime, but a constant, cheerful and encouraging ministry involving patient preaching and teaching. Anyone to be called to the Christian ministry has the greatest privilege in the world. This is because it means we have to make known to needy men and women their need of forgiveness of sins, and to be reconciled to a holy God, and to tell the solution through Christ’s sacrifice and death. To see those who have come to repent of their sins and believe on the Lord Jesus Christ for salvation, growing in grace and in obedience to the revealed Word of God is a very rich blessing. Clearly at Antioch this was a growing ministry as the Church’s influence spread. Therefore it is little wonder that the gospel work was reinforced at Antioch by the addition of these other servants of God.

In applying this part of the Bible to our lives today we need to ask a number of important questions. Has the Lord saved you? If he has, are you involved in the work of the

gospel? Do you attend the prayer meeting and take every opportunity to pray with your brothers and sisters in Christ for the work of spreading the gospel in your village, town, country and around the world? Could you reinforce the personnel involved in the work of reaching people with the glorious gospel? Are you prepared to persist in this work? Are you looking to the Lord to raise up teachers and preachers of his Word? Do you have an interest in gospel work, or do you ignore gospel work? Have you a desire to see others won for Christ and built up in him, or are you drawn to other interests or pursuits? Is your attitude similar to that expressed by Paul in Romans 10:1:

“Brothers, my heart’s desire and prayer to God for the Israelites is that they may be saved”?

May gospel work be reinforced in your life!

Chapter 9: Division Between Barnabas And Paul – Acts 15:36 - 41

1) Two important lessons.

Up till now in our study of the life of Barnabas everything has been very positive and encouraging even though at times his circumstances were otherwise. His walk with the Lord, his usefulness in the Church and his fellowship with Paul in particular have been outstanding. He has been so true to his name, a son of encouragement to the Lord’s people. His ministry was so highly valued by the other

believers who met him, and his evangelistic zeal in pointing men and women to Christ as the only Saviour was tremendous. He was undoubtedly a godly man whom the Lord honoured and used so much. Now whenever we meet someone like Barnabas we may if we are not careful fall into one of two dangers. The first danger is that we could despair. Let me explain. When we compare his life to our own we can feel such inferior Christians and think we could never reach his high standard and therefore conclude the Lord could never use anyone like us. That conclusion would be quite wrong. In fact we are told in 1 Corinthians 1:26-29 that God delights to use the weak things of the world, so there is encouragement for every believer that no one is outside of the sphere of usefulness to the Lord. We might not be able to do as much as Barnabas did, nor travel so widely as he travelled, but the Lord can still use us for every believer is precious to him. The second danger is to think that the Barnabas's of this world are super spiritual individuals without any weaknesses or flaws. That again would be quite wrong, because the apostle John, when he was writing to Christian believers declared, *“If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us.”* The only person to have ever lived a perfect life was the Lord Jesus Christ.

2) A serious division.

With all this in mind we come to what really was a turbulent experience in the life of Barnabas, because of all people he disagreed strongly with his dear friend Paul,

whom he had helped so much and valued. It came about through his response to a good suggestion.

a. An important journey proposed.

We read in Acts 15:36:

“Some time later Paul said to Barnabas, ‘Let us go back and visit the brothers in all the towns where we preached the word of the Lord and see how they are doing.’”

Someone has suggested it was after the winter and into the spring when travel would become easier, which sounds feasible, but it is only a suggestion. What we do know is that Paul suggested to Barnabas that they make a return visit to the believers in the cities which they had visited during their first missionary journey. So many had come to believe in Christ and they were formed into local Churches in the various towns and cities, so this visit would be pastoral in nature. Paul's desire was to see these believers in order to *“...see how they are doing”*. (We find a similar expression in Romans 1:11 and Philippians 1:8-9.) Paul suggested to Barnabas that they revisit these places to see how the believers were growing and developing in the Lord. It was an expression of loving care and shows us something of the pastoral heart of the apostle Paul. So this proposed journey was a very good proposal.

Before proceeding further there are a number of lessons that present themselves to us from what we have considered so far:

- (i) The salvation of a soul is only the beginning. The new spiritual life that is received when a person trusts in Christ needs continual nurturing and strengthening. This is essential in order to build believers up and help them grow towards spiritual maturity.
- (ii) Pastors, teachers and Christian workers have a great responsibility to ensure that believers are fed from God's Word.
- (iii) There is also a responsibility to safeguard and protect the Lord's people (see Acts 20:28).
- (iv) All Christian believers should have a desire for spiritual things. If we have no desire, we will not take spiritual food and will become weak, powerless and ineffective. Just like when a child does not eat, its parents rightly get very concerned to find out what is wrong because they want their child to live a normal healthy life and adequate nourishment is essential. It is the same with our spiritual lives. So our pastors and elders need to watch over us and we need to watch over our own hearts as well. We need both.

b. A serious division arose.

A very serious dispute arose between Barnabas and Paul, and it is described in verses 37 to 40. The proposal itself which Paul put forward to Barnabas met with his approval.

However, we find in verses 37 and 38 that Barnabas wanted to do something Paul was not happy with. Verse 37 says:

“Barnabas wanted to take John, also called Mark with them, but Paul did not think it wise to take him, because he had deserted them in Pamphylia and had not continued with them in the work.”

We know from Colossians 4:10 that Mark was a cousin of Barnabas. It is more than likely that this was the reason why Barnabas wanted to take John Mark with them. The word translated ‘*wanted*’ indicated Barnabas was very keen on going on this missionary tour as long as John Mark accompanied them. However, Paul considered this to be unwise. Paul's reason for adopting this attitude refers back to Acts 13:13 when John Mark left Paul and Barnabas during their missionary journey, and returned to Jerusalem. A number of suggestions as to what John Mark's reasons were may have been made, but it was the result which is recorded here. We are told, “*...he had not continued with them in the work.*” The term used means he had deserted them. It is a very strong term that indicates how he had really let Barnabas and Paul down badly. They were depending on him but he failed in his duty. This meant that he had not continued in the work of mission, the work of proclaiming the gospel to needy men and women. In spite of that Barnabas, his cousin, wanted to bring John Mark with them, and Paul, because of Mark's past attitude and failure, refused to take him. It was a major division.

Before going further, we need to take on board an important lesson from this incident. We must examine our motives in the Lord's work, especially concerning getting others to work alongside us. Here it seems Barnabas was letting his personal family connections get in the way of his spiritual discernment, and that can happen to any one of us if we are not careful.

A question that inevitably arises is, was Paul right to take such a strong position over John Mark? Whenever we are having to consider the faults and failing of others we always need to apply something Paul wrote in 1Corinthians 10:12:

“So, if you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don't fall!”

So there is never any room for us to be proud or self-righteous, for we too have many faults and failings and Paul would have taken such care himself (see also Galatians 6:1). Considering what John Mark did it is important in the light of other Bible passages that those who have failed the Lord must first be proved to be reliable before they can resume positions of responsibility. There are some very wise words for us in Proverbs 25:19 which Paul would have been very familiar with:

“Like a bad tooth or a lame foot is reliance on the unfaithful in times of trouble.”

We have absolutely no record of John Mark repenting over his desertion of Barnabas and Paul. He had obviously proved himself unfaithful, but there is no record that he had sought to put that right. It is interesting to note that among the qualifications for a deacon in 1 Timothy 3:8-10 we are told the kind of men who should be chosen for this position must be:

“Men worthy of respect, sincere, not indulging in much wine, and not pursuing dishonest gain. They must keep hold of the deep truths of the faith with a clear conscience. They must first be tested; and then if there is nothing against them, let them serve as deacons.”

In other words they are to be faithful men of God. At this point in time John Mark was not in that category, and so this sad division arose between Barnabas and Paul.

This raises the question, what should we do if we are ever faced with a similar situation? When seeking to deal with those who have known spiritual failure we must weigh up carefully what they are like now. We should certainly display consideration for that person, showing them love and also seek to restore them, while at the same time having a concern for the Lord's work. It could be quite disastrous if they were given responsibility in the Lord's work too soon, or else under testing they may fail again. So we need to be much in prayer, we should act graciously, and we should act wisely with much discernment.

Returning to Barnabas and Paul this was a very sad division. It is described in verses 39-40:

“They had such a sharp disagreement that they parted company. Barnabas took Mark and sailed for Cyprus, but Paul chose Silas and left, commended by the brothers to the grace of the Lord.”

It is bad enough in the Lord’s service when believers have a serious dispute, but it is more tragic when this leads to a sad division; and this is what we read happened between Paul and Barnabas. There was a sharp disagreement between them, so that they parted company. It is a sad but truthful reality that while Paul and Barnabas could not be separated by the persecution from unbelievers, they were separated by an unhappy disagreement between themselves. It is so unlike them and especially after all they had been through together.

This reminds us of what we read in James 5:17 where it says:

“Elijah was a man just like us.”

Now if that was true of Elijah, it was also true of Paul and Barnabas. They were men who reacted in a strong, personal, passionate way, and it appears neither of them would consider conciliation or compromise, but were adamant.

We read that Barnabas took Mark and sailed to Cyprus. This was the island from where Barnabas had come, and the first place he and Paul had visited on their first missionary journey. It was natural for Barnabas to have concern for his own people and therefore for him to go to Cyprus, accompanied by Mark. Paul chose Silas, who had come down to Antioch from Jerusalem. And there is a very important piece of information recorded for us at the end of verse 40. It tells us:

“...Paul chose Silas and left, commended by the brothers to the grace of the Lord.”

There was no such commendation by the church as far as Barnabas and Mark were concerned, and it appears they were doing their own thing regardless. When looking at situations like the one before us it is all too easy to jump to conclusions too hastily, but it does seem that the Church did support Paul over this contentious issue. Perhaps the best view on verses 39-40 is this, that the sovereign God overruled man’s sinfulness and failure and although this dispute caused division between Paul and Barnabas, the work of the Lord progressed in two different directions by two groups of two missionaries.

We read concerning Paul in verse 41 that:

“He went through Syria and Cilicia, strengthening the churches.”

Looking back to verse 23, you remember that the letter sent from the brethren in Jerusalem was addressed

“To the Gentile believers in Antioch, Syria and Cilicia.”

Now as Paul and Silas travelled from Antioch, the capital of Syria, it was the natural route to go through Cilicia, of which Tarsus was the capital, to get into Asia Minor. Paul, who was from Tarsus, may have preached the gospel first in these parts a few years after his conversion in Acts 9:30, but now he wished to revisit his own homeland further afield and see the believers strengthened in the Lord and well grounded in the faith.

There are some important lessons for us to take from this sad episode in the life of Barnabas:

- (i) We need to recognise that whilst God can forgive our past failures, such as those of John Mark, they may create problems today amongst brethren.
- (ii) The interest and concern shown by Barnabas and Paul in their homelands, and their concern for the prosperity of Christ’s kingdom in those places should be a challenge to us to be similarly concerned.
- (iii) In all our work for the Lord, we should recognise the need to be commended to God’s grace, help and protection by our home Church.
- (iv) Let us always remember that God is able to overrule our faults and failings to forward his eternal

purposes and plans. Romans 8:28 speaks of a positive active outworking by God in all things.

It would be all too easy to end this record of the life of Barnabas on this sad note, but by God’s grace we can end on a positive note. Time passed and after accomplishing many things for the Lord, Paul was eventually imprisoned for his faith in Rome. Writing from there to the Church at Colossae he said this to them about John Mark in Colossians 4:10:

“You have received instructions about him: if he comes to you, welcome him.”

Clearly there had been reconciliation between him and Paul, and he had obviously learned from his past failure, repented of it and put things right with both the Lord and with Paul. And Paul did not hold any grudge against him, but rejoiced and commended him to the Church at Colossae. It is also good to note that earlier than this Paul was able to write about Barnabas in a very positive way in 1 Corinthians 9: 6, so the disagreement of Acts 15 was not permanent. The grace of God triumphed over it all. What all of this teaches us above everything else is that our trust is not to be in men, not even the Barnabas’s of this world or the Pauls, but in their Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ. He is the same yesterday, today and forever, and never changes or fails those who truly follow him.

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