

This is the third and last talk in our series on Acts chapter 9 which we have entitled “the mighty power of God” – so called because we are focusing upon the transformation of the human heart with resultant changed values, priorities and desires. The example we have been looking at is that of Saul of Tarsus – someone who persecuted the early Church with great ferocity – who became Paul the Apostle who was to write much of the New Testament and whose life was given totally to glorify and serve the Lord Jesus Christ. A quick summary of what we have so far covered.

At the beginning of Acts chapter 9 we have Saul of Tarsus on the road to Damascus – breathing out murderous threats and wanting to destroy the Christian Church. On that road he has a dramatic encounter with the living Christ which leaves him physically blind and his pride broken. He is led to Damascus by the hand and is left in a room where for three days he doesn't eat or drink – he sits and waits to discover what will happen next. The contrast between the beginnings and end of the journey is a remarkable one – he left full of pride and self righteousness – and he arrived humbled, broken but now enlightened. His life was to be completely changed from this point.

We are then introduced to a Christian believer living in the city of Damascus at that time called Ananias. He receives instructions from the Lord in a vision to go to Saul. He gives a puzzled protest – do you mean Saul, the same one who was the main persecutor of the Church – so he says something like “Lord, are you sure you have the right person”. That is a silly - but understandable question.

What it underlines is how much fear Saul had put into the hearts of the Christians at that time. But God tells him not only that it is the right man, but he is going to be God's chosen instrument to bring the gospel message to the Gentiles. He is also told that Saul will no longer hand out suffering – but will have to endure suffering for his new found faith in Christ. As we read on in Acts – and the rest of the New Testament – we see clearly how this prophesy unfolds.

So Ananias – bravely it has to be said – goes to Saul and finds someone who is very different from the Saul that the Christians had come to fear. Instead it is someone who is blind and broken. Ananias lays hands on and prays for him – Saul receives the Holy Spirit, his eyes are physically opened, he is then baptised and last – and not least – he eats for the first time in three days. He has a good meal and is strengthened – it is a very vivid eye witness account.

So – what happens next?

Saul joins the local Church in Damascus and after a time he decides to go to Jerusalem, where the apostles were based. Damascus was 200 miles from Jerusalem (it still is!). Now this was a time when there were no mobile phones, e – mails, blogs and web sites – so the Christians would not have known about Saul's dramatic conversion and those in Jerusalem still think that Saul is a murderous man to avoid at all costs. Who is going to believe that he had a complete turn around and is no longer an enemy of Christ, but now a follower? That he is no longer persecuting Christians - but has amazingly become one.

In Damascus the link between Saul and the Church was Ananias.

In Jerusalem the link between a converted Saul and a very wary Church is Barnabas. I want us to learn about - and from him - this morning.

READ ACTS 9 VERSES 26 – 31.

When focusing upon Barnabas we are going to look at a model example of someone who is a great encourager – his name was originally Joseph but the Christians renamed him Barnabas which actually means “Son of encouragement”.

We all need encouragement, do we not? We all, at times, feel deflated, discouraged and downhearted – no matter what our temperament may be – it is part of our human condition.

There are certain things that all Christians are called to do.

We are all called to show the grace and forgiveness of Christ to all.

We are all called to use the gifts God has given us for his glory, not our own, and to serve others.

And we are all called to encourage and strengthen one another – and it is a task that we can all do.

So, what does it mean to encourage someone?

The word encourage in the New Testament is from a Greek word that means “Getting alongside someone” and strengthening them that they may stand on their own two feet. It means to put people in a definite direction – the idea of encouraging a traveller on a journey to carry on despite the obstacles and fatigue.

In this respect, Barnabas is a great example to us. We first find him at the beginning of the book of Acts – he sells his land and then shares the money.

This was a very significant and costly act – to give away your land in the first century meant giving away your future security and would have been a dramatic step of faith.

Here is a quote from AW Tozer: “God works as long as his people live daringly”

I suppose the opposite is also true – God doesn’t work when we all we want to do is control our circumstances and live comfortably”

Do we not have to live daringly to discover God working in our lives? If we gear everything to being comfortable we will leave no room for God to work.

Livingly daringly means living differently. In what ways may that be manifest?

The world says”Get as much as you can”

Jesus say “Give as much as you can”

The world says” what you own and posses is what you are”

Jesus says “a person’s life is not measured in the abundance of their possessions”

The world says greatness is measured in how much power you have over people.

Jesus says greatness is measured in how many people you serve.

Here is a quotable quote:

“When having becomes more important than giving, when possessions become more important than people – we can no longer claim to follow the Jesus of the gospels”

Barnabas was someone who put people before possessions – I dare say that some people would have thought him stupid when he sold his land and shared the money - and we may have to carry this label by some for being a disciple of Christ.

The other thing about Barnabas is that he was not only a risk taker when it came to possessions – but also when it came to people. If we are to encourage each other we must be prepared to step out and make ourselves vulnerable and take risks with those we meet.

Which brings us back to Acts chapter 9 - let us remind ourselves again how the Church in Jerusalem viewed Saul after his conversion.

Acts chapter 9 verses 26: “When he came to Jerusalem he tried to join the disciples, but they were all afraid of him, not believing he really was a disciple”

This is understandable – this is the Saul who was behind the stoning of Stephen and had left Jerusalem breathing murderous threats against the Lord’s disciples! Into the atmosphere of fear and doubt someone steps out and is willing to take a risk with this new, unexpected convert. That person is Barnabas.

“BUT...Barnabas took him and brought him to the apostles”

Do you see the picture – when Paul arrives everyone is cynical and hangs back – except Barnabas. Barnabas took the risk of believing Paul’s conversion was not a trick but genuine and he played a major part in building Paul up. He spent about a year with him in Antioch.

We have seen Barnabas give freely of his money – now he is freely giving his time. Is that not just as – or even more - costly? Think of all he could have done in that year – but he chose to give time to Paul in order to build up his faith.

Something that is important to point out here. Barnabas gave much to Paul – but he knew that he didn’t own him! There came a time when Paul took off and, in a sense, didn’t need Barnabas anymore. And Barnabas let him go.

If you give time, energy, money or possessions to someone it does not mean that you own them. God’s love – remember – is unconditional. As soon as you put “strings attached” to the relationship it is not love because instead of releasing someone it becomes something controlling and oppressive. If you end up trying to control someone then that is not encouraging them. That is tough because our selfish nature always asks “What is in this for me”. But you cannot build someone up if you have this attitude.

There is another example of Barnabas as a risk taker and encourager. It is unusually in the context of an argument – actually a sharp disagreement between himself and Paul.

The background surrounded a young man called John Mark – the cousin of Barnabas. Paul and Barnabas took him on one of their missionary journeys but John Mark lost his nerve, and did a runner! When there was an opportunity to take him again Paul and Barnabas disagreed about what should happen:

Turn forward to Acts 15 verses 36 – 41. (Page 1049)

Paul and Barnabas had a sharp disagreement and it was over whether they should risk taking John Mark with them again. Paul believed that Mark lacked stamina and strength for the hard task – he would be a

hindrance rather than a help. Barnabas felt that John Mark should be given a second chance and would make good.

Who do you sympathise with? Both had a good argument for their particular case. What would you do? Say “no” to John Mark because it is too risky – or say “yes” and give him a second chance in the hope he had learned from his first failure?

What happened was that Barnabas did go with Mark and went to Cyprus and Paul teamed up with Silas and went to Syria and Cilicia. God, in His providence and sovereignty, overruled this disagreement since as a result of it “out of one pair two were made” and two Mission teams multiplied the work. But this is not an excuse or justification for Christians to be having sharp disagreements and separating over them. This, in itself, never glorifies God or builds up the body and can be very damaging.

History actually proves Barnabas right – although this is not to criticize Paul. Mark did prove himself – he went on to be a faithful missionary and was the Mark who wrote the gospel. What is worth highlighting is that Paul and Mark became great friends. In his last letter to Timothy - when he was awaiting death in prison - Paul writes these words:

“Do your best to come to me quickly, for Demas, because he loved this world, has deserted me and gone to Thessalonica, Crescens has gone to Galatia, and Titus to Dalmatia. Only Luke is with me. Get Mark and bring him with you because he is helpful to me in my ministry.”

Paul himself came to appreciate and value Mark as a friend and fellow labourer for the gospel.

So, what can we learn from Barnabas in the way he treated Mark?

Barnabas saw the potential in him – he saw the positive side – he did not focus just on the obvious weaknesses. . It is always easy to see someone’s faults – we need to look for and recognise the person’s strengths.

There is a lovely description of Barnabas in Acts chapter 11 verse 19 – 24 and it is worth turning there to finish:

READ ACTS 11 VERSES 19 – 24. (Page 1044)

Interesting that scripture here describes Barnabas as a good man – perhaps one reason he was good is because he was quick to appreciate the good in others. When the apostles would not trust Saul of Tarsus it was Barnabas who took the risk. When Mark asked to be given a second chance and Paul said “No” Barnabas differed because he could look beyond the failure and see the potential. Barnabas was proved right both times. It is surely good to look for the good in others and rejoice when it is found.

It is surely also good to be prepared to give someone a second chance.

How many of us are prepared to give someone who has let us down another chance? If we are to encourage people we must be prepared to persevere even when we may be disappointed or feel let down – in the same way we appreciate someone who is willing to persevere with us when we disappoint and let them down!

So we finish our short series on Acts chapter 9 which we have called “The mighty power of God” – because in this chapter we see the mighty power of God at work in the human heart and how that touches and impacts others. The change from Saul of Tarsus to Paul the Apostle is a remarkable one that can only be attributed to the mighty power of God at work. The story of Saul’s conversion begins with him leaving Jerusalem with an official mandate from the high priest to arrest fugitive Christians and ends with him leaving Jerusalem as a fugitive Christian himself. Saul the persecutor has become Saul the persecuted.

And in the rest of the Acts story Luke tells us more of Paul’s sufferings - how he was stoned in Lystra and left for dead, beaten and imprisoned in Jerusalem, shipwrecked in the Mediterranean, and finally held in custody in Rome. The message is clear – witness to Christ involves suffering for Christ. It is not an accident that the Greek word for witness is where we get our word martyr from.

That has to be a challenge to us all if we claim to own the name of Christ Jesus.

But let us also be encouraged by the events of this chapter.

For we also see the mighty power of God at work through the ordinary people who we can surely all relate to – Ananias and Barnabas. They particularly say to us that the mighty power of God can be at work in our lives if we are prepared to be used, to be willing to give, to be obedient. Acts chapter 9 is a wonderful mixture of the miraculous and the ordinary - and we always need to blend them together. Here we read of the amazingly dramatic encounter on the road to Damascus between Saul and Jesus - and also of a quiet meeting in a house when Ananias seeks Saul out to comfort and pray for him – and, significantly, feed him as well. Never underestimate the importance of sharing our food.

Then we read of Barnabas befriending Paul and being the link between him and the rest of the Apostles in Jerusalem. I want to assert that the “ordinary” events in this chapter were just as significant as the extraordinary.

I want to say to you this morning that as you make the choice to show grace, forgiveness and compassion to those you meet that God, in his sovereignty and power, will use that in mighty ways to bring His kingdom here on earth. I want to urge you to be committed and make it your goal to strengthen and encourage one another – acknowledging and believing that you have been given gifts that are meant to be used for the glory of God and the benefit of others. That is not a calling to a few - but to us all.