

Good Hope through Grace

Acts 9:26-31

Being bold like Barnabas

²⁶ And when Saul was come to Jerusalem, he assayed to join himself to the disciples: but they were all afraid of him, and believed not that he was a disciple. ²⁷ But Barnabas took him, and brought *him* to the apostles, and declared unto them how he had seen the Lord in the way, and that he had spoken to him, and how he had preached boldly at Damascus in the name of Jesus. ²⁸ And he was with them coming in and going out at Jerusalem. ²⁹ And he spoke boldly in the name of the Lord Jesus, and disputed against the Grecians: but they went about to slay him. ³⁰ Which when the brethren knew, they brought him down to Caesarea, and sent him forth to Tarsus. ³¹ Then had the churches rest throughout all Judaea and Galilee and Samaria, and were edified; and walking in the fear of the Lord, and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, were multiplied.

The believers had been warned; their message was not welcomed by those in authority. Yet the common people had listened eagerly and received their witness gladly. So what did they do when they were warned? And in a world that seems to be at war with those who witness for Christ, what should we do? Many in authority today appear to hate the Christ of the Bible. They voice their opposition at every opportunity. Legislators make laws that violate the Law of the Lord. Judges frustrate those who have placed faith in Jesus. In Acts 4, we find the story of believers who were threatened for preaching the Gospel of Christ. And what did they do? They prayed for boldness (Acts 4:23-31). They applied the truth of the second Psalm as they prayed.ⁱ And God gave them the ability to proclaim Christ courageously! But their bold witness brought them even bigger warnings from the religious authorities. Where would this conflict lead?

Today's text is about the boldness of a man named "Joseph" who was nicknamed "Barnabas." "Barnabas" means "son of consolation" or "son of comfort." But it would be wrong to think of Barnabas as anything less than bold, and this text shows us why. As we think about Barnabas, let's reflect on the boldness of the believers who were examples to him. In the days ahead, we are going to need each other more desperately than we ever have before. We will need to bolster each other with boldness in order that we could all be like Barnabas. But rest assured, we can all be bold like Barnabas.

Which people were examples of boldness?

The Story of Stephen

According to Acts 6, Stephen was one of the deacons (or servants) at the church in Jerusalem. He began to proclaim God's Word with great conviction. But opposition arose from "the Synagogue of Freedmen"ⁱⁱ (who apparently were former slaves, or the children of former slaves). These men from Cyrene, Alexandria and Cilicia rose to publicly denounce Stephen's

preaching. But Stephen was “full of faith and power” and those who opposed him were not able to resist the wisdom and the Spirit of God by which he spoke (Acts 6:8-10). So they recruited false witnesses to lie about him, arrested him and hauled him into a religious court.

Stephen’s story is a good reminder for us today. The enemies of the Gospel will dream up all sorts of things to get God’s people in trouble. This is especially true in what is commonly called “the court of public opinion.” If we can be cowed by the press or public opinion, our Christianity will be perverted into something meaningless. Those in that religious court undoubtedly knew that the charges against Stephen were false. But Stephen, “full of faith and power” proceeded to use the Old Testament Scriptures to denounce their deceit and hatred of God’s truth. He showed them that they were like their forefathers who had killed the prophets. But these religious leaders had killed the Messiah, the Just One, (Acts 7:51-52). They could not withstand his preaching of Christ, but Stephen’s vision of the risen Lord standing at the right hand of God the Father enraged them. In their fury, they took Stephen outside the city, picked up large rocks and stoned him to death (Acts 7:54-60). Stephen was a magnificent example of boldness.

To see the following stories of boldness in context, we must first pause to consider the story of Saul.

The Story of Saul

There was a young man, whose name was Saul, who was present at that stoning. And he approved of Stephen’s execution (Acts 8:1). But he did more than approve; he began to actively persecute and prosecute those Jewish people who publicly professed Jesus as their Lord. Saul was a Jew who had been born in Tarsus (in Cilicia) as a Roman citizen. His Jewish name was “Saul” but his Greek name was “Paul” [*Paulos*]. Sometime early in life, his family had moved to Jerusalem where Saul trained in Judaism under the famous teacher, Gamaliel (the grandson of Hillel). About himself, Paul would later testify: “I am verily a man *which am* a Jew, born in Tarsus, *a city* in Cilicia, yet brought up in this city [Jerusalem] at the feet of Gamaliel, *and* taught according to the perfect manner of the law of the fathers, and was zealous toward God . . .” (Acts 22:3). Acts 9:1-2 describes Saul’s zeal for Judaism against Christian believers:

“And Saul, yet breathing out threatenings and slaughter against the disciples of the Lord, went unto the high priest, ² And desired of him letters to Damascus to the synagogues, that if he found any of this way, whether they were men or women, he might bring them bound unto Jerusalem.”

Saul was so determined that he constantly used his voice to threaten and denounce the disciples of the Lord. Think about Saul the next time you see an angry protester who shouts down every opponent. Saul would not be denied; he was determined to fulfill his task. He wanted to imprison any follower of “the way” of Jesus Christ. And he would resort to violence.

If the definition of “terrorism” is “the use of violence and threats to intimidate or coerce, especially for political purposes,”ⁱⁱⁱ then Saul was a terrorist. His actions struck terror in the hearts of believers throughout the region. He breathed out murderous threats against them. Acts 11:19 explains that these believers were fleeing from Jerusalem after Stephen was martyred. Apparently, Saul sought letters of introduction so that he could go to Damascus and round up those who had fled.

But you know the rest of the story. On the road to Damascus, the Lord Jesus Himself met Saul. Saul was blinded by a bright light, and he heard the voice of Jesus saying, “I am Jesus whom you are persecuting” (Acts 9:5). Think about how these words must have affected Saul the slaughterer. He was absolutely sure that Jesus had not risen from the dead, yet here was the risen Jesus speaking to him. And the one who had been breathing out murderous threats became broken, meek and thoughtful. He had been present when Stephen testified that he was seeing the risen Lord Jesus. And now Saul knew that Stephen’s bold witness was true. Jesus told him to go into the city of Damascus. He obeyed, and for three days Saul did not eat or drink.

Today’s message is about being bold, and the Book of Acts gives us another story of boldness at this point in the story.

The Story of Ananias

The Lord told Ananias, one of His disciples from Damascus, to go to meet Saul (Acts 9:10-16). He told him that he was staying at the house of Judas on a street called “Straight.” Ananias protested, “Lord, I have heard by many of this man, how much evil he has done to thy saints at Jerusalem: And here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all that call on thy name.” The Lord replied to Ananias, “Go thy way: for he is a chosen vessel unto me, to bear my name before the Gentiles, and kings, and the children of Israel: For I will show him how great things he must suffer for my name’s sake.” Undoubtedly filled with fear and trembling, Ananias did as he was told. He greeted the persecutor as “Brother Saul,” and laid his hands on him. As he did, Saul’s blindness was healed, and he arose and was baptized. He immediately began to fellowship with the disciples at Damascus. When Saul began to preach Christ in the synagogue at Damascus, the news spread like wildfire (Acts 9:20-22). The persecutor had become a preacher! The terrorist had become a teacher to show others the way to Christ! Saul was so notorious in the region that the news of his conversion must have reached the disciples at Jerusalem as well.

It’s easy to think that it’s only preachers who need to be bold. But remember, we can all bolster others with our boldness. We can be bold like Barnabas.

The Disciples at Damascus

Like the religious leaders who resented Stephen’s message, the Jews at Damascus hated Saul’s message. They began to watch the city gates to try to arrest and kill Saul. But a group of bold

believers (whose names we will not know until we get to heaven) worked together to help Saul escape. One night, they let him down over the city wall in a basket (Acts 9:25). Those disciples were bold to help a fellow believer who was in danger. They were rope-holders to help that preacher spread the news of Christ. But weren't they afraid? Yes, they knew enough about the situation to be afraid. But they knew enough about the Lord to be bold.

The story is told of Frederick Nolan, a Christian in North Africa during a time of persecution. Pursued by his enemies for many miles, Nolan began to grow fatigued. Finally, in desperation, he huddled in a small cave, thinking that he would die within the next few minutes. But after he entered the cave, he noticed that a spider began to weave a web at the cave entrance. When the pursuers arrived, they glanced at the cave, but immediately saw the spider's web. Thinking that no one could have passed that way, they went on, and Nolan escaped. After this story, Nolan commented, "Where God is, a spider's web is like a wall; Where God is not, a wall is like a spider's web." We are not spiders, but we can trust the Lord to use us to protect faithful believers.

At this point in Paul's story, we have to try to put together two stories. The first indication that we need to put the stories together comes from a phrase in Acts 9:23, "and after many days were fulfilled." In Galatians 1:15-18, Paul told his story. After his conversion, he left Damascus, went into Arabia, and then returned to Damascus. (It is not clear if 2 Corinthians 11:32-33 is a reference to his first escape from Damascus; there may have been a second escape.) It does appear that the three years mentioned in Galatians 1:18 refers to three years after Paul was converted. That is when he went to Jerusalem.

The Boldness of Barnabas

These stories lead us to our text in Acts 9:26-31. Saul's reputation as a persecutor lingered like a clammy fog on the fellowship of the church. What was the problem? According to Acts 9:26, **"And when Saul was come to Jerusalem, he assayed to join himself to the disciples: but they were all afraid of him, and believed not that he was a disciple."** Now put yourself in their sandals. If we were aware of a terrorist – someone dedicated to destroying our church – who suddenly began to profess and preach Christ, how would we respond? Wouldn't we be afraid that it was dangerous hoax? Wouldn't we be suspicious that all was not what it seemed? We would probably be like the disciples who "were all afraid of him, and believed not that he was a disciple." Apparently Barnabas was among those who were afraid, but he overcame his fear.

Verse 27 tells us, **"²⁷ But Barnabas took him, and brought him to the apostles, and declared unto them how he had seen the Lord in the way, and that He had spoken to him, and how he had preached boldly at Damascus in the name of Jesus."** Leaders like Barnabas know that boldness is not the absence of fear. No indeed, the blessing of boldness is best seen in the presence of fear. One author admired Barnabas ". . . time and again, as he took the side of the

misunderstood and the rejected, and proved to be for them a son of encouragement, or as we might put it, a tower of strength.”^{iv} Remember, Ananias needed a direct revelation from God to approach Saul. But Barnabas, “the son of consolation” needed only the help of the Holy Spirit. We could be bold like Barnabas, for we have the same Holy Spirit.

Remembering the Boldness of Others

Servant-leaders like Barnabas are willing to be bold, especially when they consider the courageous commitment of other believers. Undoubtedly, Barnabas had thought through the issue of boldness many times. They had prayed for boldness when they faced opposition. Stephen had been bold when he faced religious hostility. Ananias had been bold in his willingness to approach Saul after his conversion. The disciples at Damascus had been bold to help Saul escape – perhaps more than once. And now Barnabas knew that it was his time to be bold. He had been bolstered by the boldness of others. And now he was willing to do his part to bolster others with his boldness.

In the last two messages, we have studied the phrase “good hope through grace” from 2 Thessalonians 2:16-17. **“¹⁶ Now our Lord Jesus Christ himself, and God, even our Father, which hath loved us, and hath given us everlasting consolation and good hope through grace, ¹⁷ Comfort your hearts, and stablish you in every good word and work.”**

Barnabas clearly understood “good hope through grace.” He knew that even the most hardened persecutor could be transformed by the grace of God. Barnabas knew that the finished work of Jesus Christ – His sacrificial death, burial and bodily resurrection – granted God’s favor to those who repent. Who is the most hardened sinner on your prayer list? Could you exercise good hope through grace to watch how the Lord might transform that person?

Applying Good Hope through Grace

Servant-leaders like Barnabas understand that God is at work in the lives of those who hate Christ and persecute Christians. So Barnabas was a blessing by being bold. Saul, whom we know as the Apostle Paul, was arguably the most influential human instrument whom God used in the early church. The boldness of Barnabas was like a blessed bridge to span a dangerous divide. The Lord told Ananias that He would show Paul the great things he must suffer (Acts 9:16). Pause to consider the Lord’s gracious strategy: He placed the son of consolation side by side with the one who must suffer so greatly. Barnabas showed Paul how to hold on to good hope through grace, even among fellow believers.

Setting Aside the Fear of Others

Servant-leaders like Barnabas act in a fearless manner to help set aside the fears of others. About Saul, his brother in Christ, Barnabas “. . . declared unto them how he had seen the Lord in the way, and that He had spoken to him, and how he had preached boldly at Damascus in the name of Jesus.” He boldly proclaimed the record of God’s work in order to help others put away their worries. Don’t you just love the phrase in verse 28: **“²⁸ And he [Saul] was with them**

coming in and going out at Jerusalem.” Saul the persecutor of the godly had become Saul the saint of God. But even more, **“²⁹ And he spoke boldly in the name of the Lord Jesus, and disputed against the Grecians: but they went about to slay him.”** Saul preached to the Hellenistic Jews in Jerusalem, but they resented his message. This was the same group that had made false charges against Stephen. So the brethren at Jerusalem took Saul down to Caesarea and sent him to Tarsus. In the next message, we will consider the next part of the story.

For today, it is enough for us to recognize that, by God’s Spirit, we can be bold like Barnabas. May God give us good hope through grace!

Pastor Gordon Dickson, Calvary Baptist Church, Findlay, Ohio

ⁱ See “Nations Rage but God Reigns” (parts 1-3), messages from Psalm 2, accessed at <https://www.cbfindlay.org/?s=Nations+Rage+but+God+Reigns>

ⁱⁱ Acts 6:9 (Greek [*libertinos*])

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://www.dictionary.com/terrorism>

^{iv} Dick France, “Barnabas—Son of Encouragement,” *Themelios* 4, no. 1 (1978): 3.