

## **Barnabas: A Faithful Brother**

Acts 15:35-41

**Paul also and Barnabas continued in Antioch, teaching and preaching the word of the Lord, with many others also.**

**And some days after Paul said unto Barnabas, Let us go again and visit our brethren in every city where we have preached the word of the Lord, *and see* how they do. And Barnabas determined to take with them John, whose surname was Mark. But Paul thought not good to take him with them, who departed from them from Pamphylia, and went not with them to the work. And the contention was so sharp between them, that they departed asunder one from the other: and so Barnabas took Mark, and sailed unto Cyprus; And Paul chose Silas, and departed, being recommended by the brethren unto the grace of God. And he went through Syria and Cilicia, confirming the churches.**

Charles "Swede" Momsen was still troubled by what happened on the Saturday before Christmas 1927. As the US Submarine S-4 rose to the surface at 3:37 p.m. on December 17, it was struck by the US Coast Guard destroyer *Paulding*. The submarine had been conducting routine tests just below the surface near Provincetown, Massachusetts. The *Paulding* had been searching for rum runners near Boston. The sub sank immediately with forty men on board; those on board the destroyer marked the spot and radioed for help. The next 7 days were filled with frenzied attempts to rescue survivors one hundred and ten feet below the storm-ridden waves. When the first divers stepped onto the hull of the submarine, they heard frantic tapping in Morse code. The deadly situation became clear. Sea water pouring into the battery compartment had produced toxic chlorine gas, killing thirty-four men in the control room. There were only 6 survivors, all trapped in the airtight forward torpedo room. These men tapped out the news, and a continual question, "Is there any hope?" That was the question that still troubled Commander Momsen twelve years later: "Is there any hope?"

Acts 15:35-41 introduces that question for all of us in a wider context: "Is there any hope?" In the midst of evil, adversity, controversies and death, is there any hope for a brighter future? In this text, an argument erupted around this very question. One man saw little hope for someone and only more problems. His loyal team member saw great hope and great potential. This story about a painful disagreement helps you and me with our own stories today. What can we learn from these men about the way they parted ways? How can we use this text as a magnifying glass to look at our own painful disagreements? This passage can help you look at the approach you have taken to painful partings in the past. It may even help you understand a difference of opinion in the present. This text will most certainly help you to think differently about disagreements in your future. And using this text as an introduction to other Biblical texts can help you to find hope. Barnabas was a faithful brother who understood "good hope through grace" (2 Thessalonians 2:16-17).<sup>i</sup> Though you may find that you have to disagree with others, you could be a faithful brother like Barnabas.

**The Encourager: Faithfully Challenging Others with God's Word, 35**

<sup>35</sup> **Paul also and Barnabas continued in Antioch, teaching and preaching the Word of the Lord, with many others also.**

The story of Barnabas continued in a marvelous manner. His ministry at Antioch had reached new heights. Here, he was much loved for his gracious influence and selfless leadership. Through his ministry, the disciples were called “Christians” for the very first time at Antioch in Syria. And now, with the powerful preacher that he himself had recruited, Barnabas was serving in the place he loved so well. When controversies with false teachers had erupted, the church sent Barnabas and Paul to counsel with those at Jerusalem. They returned with Biblical advice, and continued to teach and preach the Word of the Lord. Is there anything more joyous than to see brothers and sisters in Christ dwelling together in unity? God’s Word changes people and brings about such unity, even among people who would be thought of as hopeless.

One of the most remarkable letters in the history of mankind was sent by Chaplain Henry Gerecke to his wife, Alma, on June 14, 1946. It read, “My Dear! Here’s the most unusual letter signed on the original by the most talked about men in the world. You are, without a doubt, the only woman in the world to get such a letter. . .”<sup>ii</sup> The letter read, “My dear Mrs. Gerecke, Your husband, Pastor Gerecke, has been taking religious care of the undersigned . . . during the Nuremberg trial. He has been doing so for more than half a year. We have now heard, Mrs. Gerecke, that you wish to see him back home . . . we understand this wish very well. Nevertheless we are asking you to put off your wish to gather your family around you. Please consider that we cannot miss your husband now. Our dear Chaplain Gerecke is necessary for us, not only as a pastor, but also as the thoroughly good man that he is. . .”<sup>iii</sup> The letter was signed by the Nazi criminals on trial at the War Crimes Tribunal in Nuremberg, Germany.

For such men, who had committed such atrocities, was there any hope? Even the chaplain wondered: “As Gerecke looked at the crimes of which the fifteen were accused he felt totally inadequate. ‘How can a pastor, a Missouri farm boy, make any impression on these disciples of Adolf Hitler? How can I approach them? How can I summon the true Christian spirit that this mission demands of a chaplain?’”<sup>iv</sup>

The answer, as we know from Acts 15:35, is the teaching and preaching of the Word of the Lord! This was what made an impact on the Nazi war criminals. Fritz Sauckel, head of supplying labor for Hitler, was a cruel taskmaster. By all accounts, he worked millions of slave laborers to death during World War II. At Chaplain Gerecke’s invitation, Sauckel agreed to attend the first chapel service conducted in Nuremberg prison. “At the end of the service, Sauckel asked to see Gerecke in his cell. When the chaplain arrived, he sensed that Sauckel wanted to discuss spiritual matters. After some conversation on those lines, Sauckel implored the chaplain to read the Bible and pray with him. Unafraid and unashamed, Sauckel prayed at his bedside and ended with the words: ‘God be merciful to me a sinner.’ In the weeks that followed Sauckel was given his own Bible and Luther’s Catechism. Gerecke worked with Sauckel until he reached the point where he was satisfied in his own mind that the latter was a broken man with regard to what he had done. . . Gerecke was convinced that Sauckel trusted in Christ as Saviour and had become a real Christian.”<sup>v</sup> According to Chaplain Gerecke, Fritz Sauckel was not alone; more war criminals also trusted in the finished work of Jesus Christ for cleansing from their sin.

Gerecke testified that, among others, he had seen a distinct change in Ribbentrop, Hitler’s Foreign Minister. At 1:00 a.m. on October 16, 1946, he was the first Nazi to be executed. When asked if he had any last words, “Ribbentrop responded: ‘I place all my confidence in the Lamb who made atonement for my sins, may God have mercy on my soul.’ Then he turned to Gerecke and said, ‘I’ll see you again.’”

The black hood was pulled over his face. The thirteen-coiled noose was put round his neck – and he dropped through the trap door.”<sup>vi</sup>

One of those who observed the executions wrote, "It was a grim, pitiless scene. But for those who had sat through the horrors and tortures of the [Nuremberg] trial, who had learned of . . . mankind subjected to degradation, destruction, and terror, the scene conjured a vision of stark, almost biblical justice.”<sup>vii</sup> There is no doubt that each of these criminals was justly sentenced to death. But there is no doubt that the amazing grace of Jesus Christ can save even the worst of sinners! Dear friend, you may not be a Nazi war criminal, but according to God’s Word you are also a sinner (Romans 3:23). Do you know that God commended His love toward us in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us? (Romans 5:8). Is there any hope for you? Yes, “Much more then, being now justified by His blood, we shall be saved from wrath through Him” (Romans 5:9). Yes, even Nazi war criminals can be saved by the blood of Jesus Christ – and so can you. There is hope!

Chaplain Henry Gerecke joined the band of brothers that includes Jesus Christ, Paul and Barnabas (Hebrews 2:11-13). Faithful encouragers, they challenged others with God’s Word, and you can join them. But there is something missing from the story in Acts 15. Did you see it? What was missing?

**<sup>36</sup> And some days after Paul said unto Barnabas, Let us go again and visit our brethren in every city where we have preached the Word of the Lord, and see how they do. <sup>37</sup> And Barnabas determined to take with them John, whose surname was Mark.**

Here is what we see: Paul enlisted Barnabas to take on a new mission trip, and Barnabas responded willingly. Scholars have surmised that the Jerusalem council in Acts 15 may have taken place during winter. But when the spring came and the mountain passes were open, Paul was ready to travel. So was Barnabas. They were eager to see what God’s grace had done and to deliver the message from Jerusalem (see Acts 16:4). But what was missing? Turn back to Acts 13:2-3 and it will become evident:

**“As they ministered to the Lord, and fasted, the Holy Ghost said, Separate me Barnabas and Saul for the work whereunto I have called them. <sup>3</sup> And when they had fasted and prayed, and laid *their* hands on them, they sent *them* away.”**

At the end of Acts 15, there is no reference to prayer, fasting or the leading of the Holy Spirit. We shouldn’t make too much of this, but this is an important study in contrast. It is a great reminder for us as we go forward as a church. Let us go forward on our knees with prayer and fasting. These are perilous times. The Los Angeles Superior Court has ruled against Grace Community Church to prohibit them from “conducting, participating in, or attending any indoor worship services. Lawyers for the church say the court order also bans outdoor worship unless onerous restrictions are followed.”<sup>viii</sup> There has never been a more important time for believers to come together in unity around God’s Word. So let’s not miss an important practice for how to face the challenges ahead: prayer, fasting, and seeking the mind of the Spirit in the Word of God. For the purpose of studying Barnabas, it’s also important to notice how willing he was. Though he had faced many dangers for preaching God’s Word across Asia Minor, Barnabas was still –

### **The Encourager: Faithfully Responding to the Next Challenge, 36-37**

But now we come to the heart of this text, and the disagreement between two brothers in Christ:

**<sup>37</sup> And Barnabas determined to take with them John, whose surname was Mark. <sup>38</sup> But Paul thought it not good to take him with them, who departed from them from Pamphylia, and went not with them to the work. <sup>39</sup> And the contention was so sharp between them, that they departed asunder one from the other: and so Barnabas took Mark, and sailed unto Cyprus;**

Ouch! This one hurts. Paul and Barnabas were raring to go, but they could not agree on who was going with them. Barnabas made up his mind to take John Mark, his relative, with them (Colossians 4:10). Paul thought that was not a good idea at all, since John Mark had turned back from the previous trip after the encounter with the sorcerer (Acts 13:8-13). Barnabas thought he had potential; Paul thought he had problems. By the way that Dr. Luke referred to “Barnabas and Paul” and then “Paul and Barnabas” it’s clear that they were both selfless servant leaders. They just wanted to get on with the mission. But sometimes God-honoring leaders have different perspectives on the same issues or the same people. **“And the contention was so sharp between them that they departed asunder one from the other . . .”** The Greek word in the original here is [*paroxusmos*]. This word gives us our English word “paroxysm” meaning “a sudden or violent demonstration of strong emotion.” That’s what happened between these two brothers in Christ: a sharp disagreement, a harsh contention. And here is the hardest part of all for us to take: they separated from one another. They allowed their divergent perspectives to drive a wedge between them. Ouch!

If we were to try to wrestle through these perspectives in a Biblical manner, we might have some success in understanding. Paul could have cited the words of the Lord Jesus found in Luke 9:62. After talking about the revealing “me first” responses of three men,<sup>k</sup> Jesus said, **“No man, having put his hand to the plow, and looking back, is fit for the kingdom of God.”** Perhaps Paul quoted Proverbs 25:19 to drive home his point: **“Confidence in an unfaithful man in time of trouble is like a broken tooth, and a foot out of joint.”** Hadn’t John Mark been an unfaithful man in a time of trouble? Today, you might hear someone refer to the “Bent Nail Principle.” If the nail bends one time, it’s liable to bend in that same place a few more times when you hammer it. Paul could have concluded that John Mark had a dubious reputation; Barnabas could have responded, “What if I had concluded that about you when I first heard of you?” (See Acts 9:26-28.)

Barnabas could have also responded with Biblical principles. After all, in the Messianic servant song of Isaiah 42:3-4, the prophet wrote, **“A bruised reed shall he not break, and the smoking flax shall he not quench: he shall bring forth judgment unto truth. He shall not fail nor be discouraged, till he have set judgment in the earth: and the isles shall wait for his law.”** (See also Matthew 12:17-20).

God’s grace can take bruised reeds and make beautiful music, as does a woodwind instrument. Most people would have discarded a smoking flax wick, thinking it would never again burst into flame. But the Messiah delights in bringing fresh light out of smoking flax. And that is what He is still doing in us today. Or perhaps he looked at Paul and said, “Consider Peter!” According to Mark 16:7, the angel at the tomb sent a message from the resurrected Christ: **“But go your way, tell his disciples and Peter that he goes before you into Galilee: there shall ye see Him, as He said unto you.”** Don’t miss those two words, “And Peter!” His story teaches us that failures aren’t finished. Peter, the dismal failure, was the humbled, mighty preacher at Pentecost. Barnabas did not believe that failures were finished. As the son of consolation, he was determined to come alongside a former failure. As we shall see, the results were amazing. Yes, people can talk about “The Bent Nail Principle” but you could respond with

“The Broken Bone Principle.” Doctors will tell you that when a broken bone heals, it reinforces that break: making the place of brokenness the strongest point on that bone for years afterward. Who have you given up on? About whom could you rightly apply the words of Jesus and the proverb about an unfaithful man? But could you not go on to respond like Barnabas to help someone through brokenness to grow better? Barnabas was

### **The Encourager: Faithfully Enlisting Others for the Challenges Ahead, 37-39**

It is not our purpose here to take sides in this argument; indeed it is not necessary to do so. But it is important to note that Barnabas took John Mark and sailed away to Cyprus – apparently without asking for advice and counsel from the church at Antioch. That had to be painful. Was he frustrated with Paul? Or was he merely trying to get out of the way so that Paul could serve the Lord effectively? Barnabas had invested so much of himself – selflessly – in that church. But then he sailed away. Luke is careful to note that Paul chose Silas and departed only after being “**recommended by the brethren to the grace of God.**” After all we have learned about Barnabas, the son of consolation, his actions are puzzling.

#### *The Rest of the Story*

To their credit we do not read of these men continuing to make an issue of this matter. Quite the opposite. Paul would later hold Barnabas up as an example (1 Corinthians 9:6). The Great Commission was more important than the great frustration they felt with each other.

Is there any hope? You never know when a person might change the course of history. If you were to stop by your neighbor’s house today to ask two questions, what do you think the answers would be? First, have you ever heard of the Syrian church at Antioch? Second, have you ever heard of the Gospel of Mark? God used John Mark to write that Gospel! Through the encouragement of Barnabas, John Mark returned to usefulness for the challenges ahead. The rest of the story is this: faithful Barnabas helped a former failure to become a faithful co-laborer with the Apostle Paul! Undoubtedly, Paul learned a very important lesson from this episode. His letters to the churches are full of hope and the amazing, restoring grace of Jesus Christ.

In 2 Timothy 1:7, Paul encouraged his disciple Timothy, “**For God has not given us the spirit of fear; but of power, and of love, and of a sound mind.**” And perhaps to encourage Timothy to learn from a former failure, Paul wrote, “**Only Luke is with me. Take Mark, and bring him with thee: for he is profitable to me for the ministry**” (2 Timothy 4:11). In fact in Philemon 23-24, Paul included John Mark among his list of co-laborers, “**There salute thee Epaphras, my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus; Marcus, Aristarchus, Demas, Lucas, my fellow laborers.**”

What can we learn? Failures aren’t finished. There is hope! But John Mark would remind failures who have been faithless and fearful with the words of Jesus, “**Why are ye so fearful? How is it that ye have no faith?**” (Mark 4:40). If you want real help, don’t keep fluttering and floundering in your failures. Watch for a Barnabas who can help restore you to faithfulness. In the days ahead, we will desperately need faithful men and women who can carry the message of Christ to others. To all of you, we would appeal with Paul’s words: “**Thou therefore, my son, be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus. And the things that thou hast heard of me among many witnesses, the same commit thou to faithful**

**men, who shall be able to teach others also.”** Let each of us be a faithful brother like Barnabas. Let us commit the things that we have heard to those who will be able to teach others also.

Twelve years later, “Swede” Momsen was still troubled by the sinking of the S-4. Hampered by severe storms, the rescue operations had ceased on Christmas Eve 1927. They could not rescue those six men. But Commander Momsen resolved that they would learn from this episode. Like Paul, Momsen learned how to answer the question, “Is there any hope?” His tour of duty placed him in the Submarine division of the Bureau of Construction and Repair. There he set to work on devices to rescue submariners from the depths. His “Momsen Lung” helped individual sailors escape from downed submarines. And his crowning triumph was the Momsen-McCann Rescue Chamber, which could be attached to a submarine’s hatch.<sup>x</sup> In May 1939, the US submarine *Squalus* sank off the coast of Isles of Shoals, New Hampshire. Stranded in 243 feet of water, the men on board wanted to know, “Is there any hope?” Charles Momsen raced to the scene and used the Momsen-McCann Rescue Chamber from the deck of the USS Falcon. Thirty-three survivors owed their lives to Momsen’s diving bell which rescued them all in four trips into the icy depths. Momsen’s answer, would have echoed the answer from Barnabas and Paul, “Yes, there is hope!”

*Pastor Gordon Dickson, Calvary Baptist Church, Findlay, Ohio [www.cbcbfindlay.org](http://www.cbcbfindlay.org)*

---

<sup>i</sup> In a letter written by the Apostle Paul to the church at Thessalonica. It is most interesting to find this phrase, written by the very man with whom Barnabas had disagreed.

<sup>ii</sup> Don Stephens, *War and Grace*, New York: Evangelical Press, 2005 p. 264

<sup>iii</sup> Ibid. p. 264-26

<sup>iv</sup> Gerecke, Henry Fred “Hank” World War II Graves, accessed at <https://ww2gravestone.com/people/gerecke-henry-fred-hank/> (See also *Randolph County Illinois Veterans*, Turner Publishing, 2003, p. 190)

<sup>v</sup> Stephens, p. 262

<sup>vi</sup> Ibid. p. 269. (See also *Nuremberg Executions: Prison Commandant Burton C. Andrus* later recalled that Ribbentrop turned to the prison's Lutheran chaplain, Henry F. Gerecke, immediately before the hood was placed over his head and whispered, "I'll see you again." Accessed at [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nuremberg\\_executions](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nuremberg_executions) (It is remarkable, but Gerecke later received many letters denouncing him as a “Jew hater” because he had shared the Gospel of Christ faithfully with these war criminals. See Stephens, *War and Grace*, p. 271.)

<sup>vii</sup> Robert E. Conot, quoted in “The Trial of the Century – And of All Time, *Flagpole Magazine*, July 17, 2002, p.6, accessed at [http://www.law.uga.edu/academics/profiles/dwilkes\\_more/his34\\_trial2.html](http://www.law.uga.edu/academics/profiles/dwilkes_more/his34_trial2.html)

<sup>viii</sup> Fred Jackson, “L.A. Superior Court rules against John MacArthur’s Church” *OneNewsNow*, September 11, 2020 accessed at <https://onenewsnow.com/legal-courts/2020/09/11/la-superior-court-rules-against-john-macarthur-s-church>

<sup>ix</sup> The Hidden Agenda, a message from Luke 9:51-56, accessed at

<https://www.sermonaudio.com/sermoninfo.asp?SID=129131618280>

<sup>x</sup> See Charles Momsen [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Charles\\_Momsen#The\\_diving\\_bell](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Charles_Momsen#The_diving_bell)