

A SON OF ENCOURAGEMENT

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Have you ever had such a bad track record that people didn't want to associate with you or welcome you into their fellowship? Or welcome you back? It happens all the time. People are rejected because of their pasts. The load of baggage they drag behind them as they enter the Christian life keep them from enjoying what should be instant acceptance. Well that's the kind of reception Saul received when he went back home to Jerusalem.

"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." Acts 9:26. The news of Saul's conversion must have reached Jerusalem long before he himself arrived there. But it was hardly credible. The Ethiopian could more easily change his skin or the leopard its spots than the arch-persecutor become a believer. Might it not be part of a deep-laid plot to gain acceptance within the Christian fellowship so as to deal it a more effective death-blow? The simple-minded and warm-hearted disciples of Damascus might welcome him impulsively as one of themselves, but if he came to Jerusalem it would be best to keep him at arm's length until his conversion could be certified beyond any doubt. The disciples feared Saul.

And then, out of nowhere, comes Barnabas to encourage Saul and be his personal friend and advocate. "But Barnabas took him, and brought him to the apostles." Acts 9:27. Barnabas first appears in Acts as an outstandingly generous contributor to the common fund set up in the Jerusalem church (Acts 4:36f). He was an encouraging character. Wherever he found a person or a cause needing to be encouraged, he supplied all the encouragement he could. When Saul sorely needed a friend in Damascus, Ananias filled this role, and equally now Barnabas befriended him when he stood in similar need in Jerusalem. His old friends would now repudiate him as a turncoat from Judaism, and new friends could be made only with difficulty in the community which he had harried so ruthlessly.

I'll never forget the first elder of the little St. Johns' church to which we were assigned in a two-church district. It was some twenty-five miles from where we were living at the time. These were all country, small town parishioners. They were kind of standoffish about

welcoming a young unordained pastor newly come from the big city. But Carl Mosher and his wife Maxine were the most friendly and hospitable folks you'd ever want to meet. And they were my ticket into the midst of this little church family. Every church needs warmhearted, outgoing people to welcome the stranger in their midst.

Barnabas stepped up and "took hold of Saul." "Come with me, I'll set this thing straight with these men. They trust me." So off they went, and Barnabas "declared unto them how he [Saul] 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." Acts 9:27. Barnabas was evidently in contact with some of the Hellenists in Damascus who told him about Saul's preaching mission there. So Barnabas told the brethren, "Look, I've check this guy out—he's the genuine item. He saw the risen Christ, just like all of you. He's on our team. He's with us.

We can imagine Saul's despair, loneliness, and disappointment when other Christians rejected him. He later expounded deeply about the "in Christ" existence, according to which earthly barriers are broken because we are one body in Christ. Yet the members of that body did not trust him. How many bright new Christians face such loneliness and disappointment! It can lead to despair and bitterness. But God often provides a way of healing in the form of an encourager. Would that there were more Ananiases and Barnabases in our churches.

The risk Barnabas took was immense. Was Saul a spy? His fiery enthusiasm and outspoken boldness would have provoked negative reactions in some of the more sober elders. Who is this young upstart, who goes to extremes in everything he does? He must be an unbalanced individual, for once he was violently opposing Christianity and now he is vigorously defending it. Yet Barnabas stuck, his neck out to support Saul. He was willing to take that risk. When we glorify risk-taking today, most often we do so about our personal exploits. Here is another type of risk-taking: accepting new people and pushing them forward. This is Christian risk-taking. Because Christianity is a religion of love, some of our greatest exploits are ventures of love. Taking the risk of believing people is one such venture.

Barnabas also encouraged Saul by telling the apostles Saul's story. In order to be able to do this, he had first listened to that story. Often leaders are so interested in telling their own story that they have no

time to listen to those of others. By telling the apostle's Saul's story, Barnabas acted as a public relations man for the junior person. Normally public relations work is done for leaders by the juniors, but here that order is reversed. Paul often did the same sort of things in his letters. He gives, for example, glowing tributes of younger, lesser-known people, such as Titus and Timothy (2 Cor. 8:16-24; Phil. 2:19-24).

Bob Russell tells this story about the time when he was a student in his senior year at Bible college, I met a tall, gangly basketball player from the University of Cincinnati. He was 6' 11" and weighed 190 lbs. He had been an All-American from New York state. We struck up an unusual friendship. I'd grown up in a Christian home and was studying for the ministry, but Neil had almost no Christian training or understanding. In fact, he was the most foul-mouthed person I had ever met! When we would meet to go to a basketball game, for the first ten minutes he would just spew out profanity until he would remember whom he was with.

About the only common interest we had was basketball, and we went to each other's games. But as that friendship grew, I invited Neil to go with me to the country church where I was preaching on weekends. He was an instant hit with the people because of his height and they were an instant hit with them because they fed every Sunday after church.

He came with me several times and finally the basics of the Christian life began to sink in. I had the opportunity to study the Bible with him on several occasions. Then one Sabbath morning in that country church, Neil walked forward and gave his life to Christ.

His baptism was very unusual. The baptistery was right under the pulpit area where they had to move the pulpit to a trap door. The candidate had to walk across the platform from the changing room. When Neil came out of the changing room, I could hardly keep from laughing. He had put on the longest robe we had and it still looked like a miniskirt. It came down to the middle of his thighs. He got into the baptistery and I baptized him in sections. I thought I would never get him back up! But it was a great day of rejoicing as Neil gave his life to Christ.

About two weeks later, a group of us from the seminary were playing basketball at the local 'Y.' Neil was playing with us. He took an elbow to the ribs and winced with pain and also let fly a four-letter

word. He shouldn't have done that but I was kind of proud of him because I had heard him use a lot worse than the one he selected!

But one of the preacher boys stopped the game and put the ball under his arm and said, "Well, is that any way for a Christian to talk?"

No, it wasn't, but it wasn't any way for a new Christian to be treated either. That young preacher failed to understand where Neil was coming from. He failed to be patient and sensitive.

An experienced Christian has written, "How many prodigals are kept out of the kingdom of God by the unlovely character of those who profess to be on the inside." Brothers and sisters, how do we treat them when they come into the church?

For the first time in his ministry, Saul spoke freely about Christ in Jerusalem. "And he was with them coming in and going out at Jerusalem." Acts 9:28. In the company of respected disciples he was now set free to bear his testimony to the glory of God. What made the difference? Barnabas. Why don't you step up like Barnabas did for Saul. Look for someone who needs a second chance. Someone needs a large dose of grace to get started in the Christian life.

Now Paul tells us that he met only two of the disciples. "I went up to Jerusalem to see Peter, and abode with him fifteen days. But other of the apostles saw I none, save James the Lord's brother." Galatians 1:18, 19. The purpose of Paul's going to Jerusalem on this occasion was to make the acquaintance of the leading apostle Peter. Peter was a primary informant on matters which it was now important that Paul should know—the details of Jesus' ministry and His teaching. During those fifteen days Peter could impart to Paul much information of this kind which Paul sought. But one thing Peter and James could not impart to him was his apostolic commission, which he had already received direct from the risen Lord on the Damascus road. Paul's object in going up to Jerusalem was to establish bonds of fellowship with the leaders of the mother church and obtain from them information which could be obtained nowhere else.

One of the facts which Paul researched in his Jerusalem' visit was a list of Jesus' resurrection appearances of which Paul reminds his Corinthian readers. In that list two individuals are mentioned by name as having seen the risen Christ, and two only: "he appeared to Cephas" and "he appeared to James" (1 Cor. 15:5, 7). To be an apostle one must have been an eye-witness of the risen Christ. Of Peter it is reported in Luke's gospel: "The Lord is risen indeed, and hath appeared to Simon." Luke 24:34.

So far as James is concerned, he was a member of the family of Jesus who viewed Jesus' public activity with aloofness, not to say hostility. James does not appear to have been a follower of His before His death. Yet after Jesus' resurrection His mother and brothers are found in association with the apostles. James occupied an increasingly influential position in the church of Jerusalem. The only explanation for this is that the resurrected Jesus must have appeared to His brother James at some point before His ascension to heaven.

Peter and James were leaders of two distinct groups within the early church of Jerusalem. The group led by Peter met in the house of Mary, the mother of John Mark (Acts 12:17). There were likewise brethren more closely associated with James.

Peter told Paul how the risen Lord had appeared not only to himself but also to "the twelve" and again to "more than five hundred brethren at one time." James told him how Christ had appeared not only to him but also to "all the apostles." Paul then, no doubt, shared with them his experience of seeing the resurrected Lord, which was an encouragement to the brethren in Jerusalem. Paul's testimonial of the appearance of the risen Lord was "and last of all he was seen of me also, as of one born out of due time." (1 Cor. 15:8).

The miracle of the resurrection lies at the very foundation of the Christian's hope. There would be no hope for any one were it not for the resurrection of Christ. The Apostle Paul makes this point very clear in his epistle to the Corinthians. "I delivered unto you," he writes, "that which I also received, how that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures; and that He was buried, and that He rose again the third day according to the Scriptures." 1 Cor. 15:3, 4. It would have accomplished nothing for us that Jesus Christ should have died for our sins and been buried, if the work had stopped there. With that alone to look to, we would only be plunged deeper into the darkness and despair of our mortality. But the record does not end in the gloom of the sepulcher, but in the glory of triumph. Christ "was delivered for our offences," but He "was raised again *for our justification*." Rom. 4:25.

The resurrection was a most glorious demonstration, before all the universe, of the success of the plan of redemption. It was the crowning manifestation of the power of God in the flesh. It told Satan in unmistakable language that all his work must fail, and his kingdom come to an end. It was an unmistakable assurance of the power of

God to put life and righteousness into one who was dead in sin. And what it was then, it is today.

So here Saul was in his hometown Jerusalem and he falls into a common pitfall of all neophyte preachers, he takes up a debate with his opponents over the name of Jesus. It's always dangerous going back home.

One preacher relates how returning to his hometown Houston, he gave serious thought to hiding out from his high school English teacher. He tells how in his senior year Lupe Lopez and I rode that motorcycle right down the middle of her English literature class. Brooommm! Our dear teacher grabbed for her heart pills and popped them like candy under her tongue. We rode that bad boy down the stairway, straight into the principal, who promptly ran us right out of the school for the next several days. He never could take a joke! Our past haunts us and so did Saul's for it evidently rankled on the nerves of some Greek-speaking Jews with him he debated.

We read, "And he spake boldly in the name of the Lord Jesus, and disputed against the Grecians: but they went about to slay him." Acts 9:29. Perhaps these were the same ones as those with whom Stephen had previously "disputed" (Acts 6:9). Saul was a Hellenist by virtue of his birth in Tarsus and his Roman citizenship. He was fluent in Greek as he argued the case over Jesus' name. As these Hellenists had engineered the trial and death of Stephen, no doubt Saul felt an obligation to take up the mantle left by Stephen. He might think that the fact of his conversion would have weight with them, and that the miraculous event which happened to him would convince them also that Jesus was the true Messiah.

Given the great blessings that come from conversion, it is possible to place so much emphasis on this that converts forget that they are people under a commission. For Saul conversion and commission went together.

The conversion of the great Indian evangelist Sadhu Sundar Singh (1889-1929) was remarkably similar to that of Saul. He too was a young man who vehemently opposed Christianity until he had a vision of Christ that transformed his life. When his family members, who were Sikhs, realized that the conversion he professed was not a passing fancy, they poisoned him and sent him away from home. He landed at the doorstep of the home of a pastor, desperately ill. The doctor who saw him gave up hope that he would recover. "But as he lay, there came to him the profound belief that God had not called

him out of darkness to die without witnessing to his faith in Christ, so he began to pray with all his remaining powers.” He recovered and launched out on a life of witness. Donning the garb of an Indian holy man, he traveled the length and breadth of India barefoot, preaching the gospel. This earned him the name “the apostle of the bleeding feet,” for his feet, unprotected from the hostile elements, sometimes bled. His realization as he lay dying was that he was “saved to tell others” the gospel.

We must teach converts about Christian service and get them active the moment they come to Christ.

“He spake boldly in the name of the Lord Jesus.” Acts 9:29. The name of Jesus of Nazareth is Jesus Himself. And what does it mean?—Saviour, Deliverer. The saving power is in Himself. Virtue, power, went out from Him, and that healed the people. He is life; He is the Saviour, and His name is just what He is,—Jesus. Baptized into the name of Jesus Christ,—into the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost,—means taking all the fullness of God’s life, and letting all of God’s gifts combined come in to lift us up. “And they that know Thy name will put their trust in Thee; for thou, Lord, hast not forsaken them that seek Thee.” Ps. 9:10. Whoever knows the name of the Lord, will put his trust in Him, and will not be disappointed.

I tell you it is a wonderfully blessed thing to know the name of the Lord. There is power in that name—not in the five letters that compose it,—but in the name itself, for it is *life*. You cannot put Jesus on the wall; you cannot picture Him with chalk; you cannot write Him with ink, but He is written by the Spirit of the living God, in the very being, because He is life and energy.

In the strength of that name the lame arose and walked, and in the strength of that name he continued to walk. So it is in the spiritual life. Not only are we forgiven through faith in the name of Jesus, but “the just shall *live* by faith.”

It is faith from the beginning of the Christian life. And that faith is faith in the name of the Lord Jesus. At the beginning of their Christian life they are baptized into the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost; and that name is their safeguard in all time to come; for “the name of the Lord is a strong tower; the righteous runneth into it, and is safe.” Prov. 18:10.

The Hellenist Jews were not about to permit this kind of witness, so they plotted to kill him. “Which when the brethren knew, they brought him down to Caesarea, and sent him forth to Tarsus.” Acts 9:30. As

the heat started rising again, along came the brethren who said, in effect, “You know what, Saul? You’re history. Those guys will slice your throat so fast you won’t know it until you sneeze! You’re going on a trip—a cruise, in fact—to Tarsus. So, pack light. You sail tonight.”

A bunch of unknowns help him escape Jerusalem—the city he once owned. The story of Saul’s conversion in Acts 9 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.

Have you ever felt like you’ve been running from your past as a fugitive and it has finally caught up with you? That can give you nightmares and sleepless nights. Jesus loves fugitives. Just as He loved Jacob who was fleeing from his past mistakes at home and slept on the cold ground all lonely, the Lord gave him a reassuring dream of the ladder connecting heaven and earth and that ladder was Jesus. So are you running away from something, someone, somehow? You are running straight into the arms of Jesus. He is taking you captive by his love.

The late Episcopal Bishop James Pike made a name for himself by his denials of basic Christian doctrines. He denied the virgin birth and the resurrection. He was even brought up on what almost amounted to a heresy trial, and to be charged with heresy in the Episcopal Church in those days required some doing. Pike had a terribly messed up theology. He had a messed up life also. He got into the occult. One of his sons had committed suicide, so he tried to contact him through a Philadelphia medium named Arthur Ford. This even was widely publicized. Then he went to Israel to research a book on the historical Jesus, which he said was going to be the most shocking thing that he had done yet. While he was there investigating the countryside for the background for this book, he got lost in the desert and died.

A person might look at that and say, “Can anything good come out of such a life?” It is hard to see anything good in it. Pike seemed to have left only rubble behind him. But Pike had another son whose name was Christopher. In 1967, when Christopher was about sixteen years old, he got into the drug culture and drifted to California. He was at the University of California at Berkeley, where many wild things were going on in those days. He seemed to be on the same path his brother had been on. But while he was there, he heard a

converted hippie testifying about Jesus Christ on the steps of Sproul Hall. He found himself wondering whether Christianity could perhaps actually be true. He went into seclusion and began to read the New Testament. He had never actually read it before. As he began to read it, he found the very truths that his father had rejected and denied. He found the real Jesus. He was converted and became active in Christian work. Unusual? Yes, but not for God.

In more recent times we have Madalyn Murray O'Hair, the well-known atheist, who got prayer and Bible-reading out of the public schools through a court case. Her son, who was raised on her particularly angry form of atheism, found Jesus Christ as his Saviour and wrote a book about it, confessing the errors of his early days.

There is perhaps no more chilling example of the independent spirit taken to the extreme than in the tragic, criminal life of Timothy McVeigh. He lived most of his life outside the boundaries of dependence on others. He lived as an outcast, an extremist, refusing to place himself under any authority, let alone the United States government, which he despised. Free to do completely as he pleased, he did the unthinkable. He took the lives of 168 innocent Americans, many of them children, when he bombed the federal building in Oklahoma City. After a long manhunt, and months of legal meandering, Timothy McVeigh was sentenced to death by lethal injection for that vicious crime. Throughout the entire ordeal, he maintained an eerie, calm composure, not once showing even a shred of remorse or regret. Defiant and proud, he accepted his fate as a martyr for his demented cause.

When asked how he could face death with such stoic resolve, he said he was unafraid. When asked why, he said he controlled his own fate. He then cited the following poem, written over a century ago, by William Ernest Henley:

Invictus

Out of the night that covers me,
Black as the Pit from pole to pole,
I thank whatever gods may be
For my unconquerable soul.

In the fell clutch of circumstance
I have not winced nor cried aloud.
Under the bludgeonings of chance
My head is bloody, but unbowed.

Beyond this place of wrath and tears
Looms but the Horror of the shade,
And yet the menace of the years
Finds and shall find me unafraid.

It matters not how strait the gate,
How charged with punishments the scroll,
I am the master of my fate:
I am the captain of my soul.

Chilling words, aren't they? But they were treasured by a man who believed his soul was unconquerable—that he was, in fact, in charge of his own destiny.

Just to set the record straight. William Henley was absolutely wrong. So was Tim McVeigh. Our lives are not caught “in the fell clutch of circumstance.” Our heads are not to be “bloodied, but unbowed.” You and I are neither the “masters of our fate” nor are we the “captains of our souls.” We are to be wholly, continually, and completely dependent on the mercy of God, if we want to do the Lord's work the Lord's way.

Jesus loves you. Whatever sordid past you may have come from He is searching for you. He has a gift of forgiveness for you. He is the God of new-beginnings for your life.