

What should we learn from the account of Paul and Barnabas?

Paul and Barnabas traveled together through the island of Cyprus and the province of Asia (modern Asia Minor) preaching the gospel in the first missionary journey (Acts 13). The name Barnabas means “son of encouragement,” and encouragement was his first function in Paul’s life. When the newly converted Saul/Paul came to the Christians at Jerusalem, they were afraid of him. But Barnabas built a bridge between Saul and the other Christians, vouching for the reality of his faith and ministry (Acts 9:26-27).

Later, news reached Jerusalem of a burgeoning church in Syrian Antioch, and Barnabas was sent to encourage the believers there (Acts 11:22). Many people began coming to the Lord and joining the church, so Barnabas sought out Paul and, finding him, brought him to Antioch. The biblical account calls Barnabas “a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and faith” (Acts 11:24). While Paul and Barnabas were still in Antioch, a prophet named Agabus foretold a famine, and the church determined to send relief to the brothers living in Judea (verses 27-29). They sent Paul and Barnabas to deliver the gift (verse 30).

After that, the Holy Spirit chose Paul and Barnabas to be missionaries (Acts 13:2), and the church of Antioch sent them off. Paul and Barnabas took John Mark along as a helper and traveled through many Gentile areas with the gospel. They were “men who . . . risked their lives for the name of our Lord Jesus Christ” (Acts 15:25). Halfway through their journey, Mark left Paul and Barnabas, and this became a point of contention later. As they planned a second missionary journey, Paul and Barnabas disagreed on whether to take Mark again. Paul was determined not to bring him, due to his forsaking them previously. Barnabas, ever the encourager, was unwilling to leave John Mark behind. A “sharp

disagreement” arose between them, and they parted ways. From that point on, Barnabas traveled with John Mark, and Paul chose Silas as his companion in ministry (Acts 15:36-41). Later, we see indications that the rift was healed, and Paul considered Mark “helpful” in the ministry (2 Timothy 4:11).

From the relationship of Paul and Barnabas we can draw an important lesson. Here were two godly men, loved by the churches, filled with the Spirit, enduring persecution together, seeing people saved, and enjoying an effective ministry. Yet they were fallible and did not see eye to eye on everything. They quarreled and parted ways. Even the best and most faithful among us are prone to interpersonal conflicts and mistakes. We are all fallen human beings. The ministries of both men continued—in fact, the number of missionary teams doubled! God can use even our disagreements to further His work.

Paul and Barnabas continued to depend on God. They moved forward peacefully, even though it meant parting ways. In matters of personal opinion and practical procedure, Paul and Barnabas differed. In matters of doctrine, they both saw the necessity of sharing the gospel with the world. They were united in what is truly important.