

PAUL'S LIFE AND TEACHINGS

Lesson 8

Paul's Friends and Co-Workers

I have the great honor and blessing of working with some really good friends. Kevin and I have been friends since we were 14 years old, and we work together daily. Larry and I have been friends since high school, and it is wonderful to see and work with him. Many of my friends are more recent. Dr. Bob and I have been friends since 1993. We tell each other the same jokes, and we laugh at the same places. With all these friends, we share not only history, but purpose. We work at the same job toward the same end.

It is really nice. I know what they can do, and they know the same of me. They know my weaknesses, where I am likely to need help, and I know the same for them. They look out for me, just as I try to look out for them.

In this way, the blessing becomes a double blessing. First, I get to be around my friends, people I care about. It makes my work much more enjoyable with someone to help shoulder difficult burdens, and someone to revel in victories. Second, it also makes the work quality much better. As the teacher wrote in Ecclesiastes 4:12, "Though one may be overpowered, two can defend themselves. A cord of three strands is not quickly broken."

Sometimes, we fall into a trap of thinking that friendship exists mainly for children. It does not. Friendship is modeled for us as something for all ages. Jesus himself models friendship in his relationship with his disciples. He instructed his disciples to "Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends" (Jn 15:13). Of course, this is the love Jesus showed us. Jesus is communicating his friendship and his care to us.¹

What of Paul? What do we know of his friends? Was Paul a loner? Were his friends Christians? Did he keep friends long? Were his friendships deep or shallow? What were they built around?

¹ God has carefully shown a number of ways he relates to us. Each way is important in various aspects of our lives. God is Creator God, the all-powerful majestic one who sits on high in control of all things. There are times I need Creator God, and no one else will quite do. God also reveals himself as Father God, and having been blessed with a wonderful earthly father, this aspect of God's relationship to me is, at times, just what I need. I need to know that God is there to comfort, care, and protect me, constantly looking for my maturity and good as he cultivates me into what I should be. But, God also relates to us as a friend. Jesus, God incarnate, came into our world in our form to walk, joke, teach, uplift, edify, nurture, and share. Jesus came as not just master and teacher, but as a friend. "What a friend I have in Jesus!" It is worth singing about!

Paul does not answer these questions directly, but we can examine Paul and his friends and co-workers and glean insight not only into Paul's life, but also into the godly principles of friendship and the way God can work through our relationships. Of necessity, several of the relationships we will look at will add a bit more of the narrative of Paul's life than we have yet covered, so we hope to weave more biography of Paul into this lesson.

PAUL, POST-CONVERSION

Over the past two weeks, we considered Paul's conversion and the relationship with Ananias. We will pick up from there this week. Paul spends some time in Damascus before heading into Arabia for a few years. Luke notes little beyond Paul spending time in Damascus, but Paul gives us the details of his venture in Arabia in Galatians 1:17. After Paul escapes from Damascus (lowered down through an opening in the city walls in a basket to avoid the assassination attempts of some Jews), Paul made the journey to Jerusalem.

This is Paul's first visit to the city since he left on that fateful trip to Damascus three years earlier, meeting Jesus on the way. Paul is coming back to a place a different man, with different priorities, a different vision, a different purpose, knowing Jesus personally as Lord and Savior. Rumors returned before Paul. No doubt Paul's family wondered what was up, as did Paul's friends. We know that the church in Jerusalem had heard of Paul's "conversion."

In fact, the church was not certain that Paul had genuinely found faith in Jesus. Luke tells us that Paul tried to join up with the church in Jerusalem, but he was not welcomed! "They were all afraid of him, for they did not believe that he was a disciple" (Acts 9:26).

One can fairly suspect that Paul was hurt. We can read from Paul's writings enough to see that Paul cared how others thought of him, and anguished over misconceptions of his devotion and ministry. Paul must have battled shame over confronting his deeds of persecution three years earlier. The first time Paul walked by the place where Stephen was martyred and the courts where Paul brought the church members to account are places that must have haunted Paul. These were places that Paul had to face alone, without Christian companionship or help.

Into this gap comes Barnabas.

BARNABAS

Luke takes a moment in Acts to let us know that Barnabas took a special role in the life of Paul. Let us see it in full context:

And when he had come to Jerusalem, he attempted to join the disciples. And they were all afraid of him, for they did not believe that he was a disciple. But Barnabas took him and brought him to the apostles and declared to them how on the road he had seen the Lord, who spoke to him, and how at Damascus he had preached boldly in the name of Jesus (Acts 9:26-27).

These are small verses, but verses that speak volumes. Paul's life is hurting, his ministry is hurting, and in comes Barnabas. Maybe we should pause here and note something about Barnabas.

Barnabas was really named "Joseph." He was from the priestly caste, a Levite. Barnabas was not native to Jerusalem; he came from the island of Cyprus. Barnabas was a giving person whose acts backed his beliefs. When the church was just getting its feet on the ground in Acts 4, we read that Barnabas owned a field, sold it, and gave the money to the apostles for use. This same passage (Acts 4:36-37) tells us that the apostles gave "Joseph" the nickname "Barnabas." Luke tells us why: "Joseph, a Levite from Cyprus, whom the apostles called Barnabas (which means Son of Encouragement)."

"The righteous chooses his friends carefully, the way of the wicked leads them astray"
Prov. 12:26

Barnabas was a true believer who had years earlier put his "money where his mouth was" and lived up to his nickname as an encourager. Barnabas intervenes with Paul and the church, learns Paul's story, and brings Paul into fellowship with the church.² The result? Paul was able to go "in and out among them at Jerusalem, preaching boldly in the name of the Lord" (Acts 9:28).

This was the start of a special friendship in Paul's life. Paul was not in Jerusalem long before his preaching put his life at risk. No doubt Paul's former acquaintances were involved in going after Paul the very way Paul had persecuted the church the last time Paul was in Jerusalem. The church saw that Paul's life was in danger and sent Paul home to Tarsus (Acts 9:30).

Friendship involves risks and hard work. Putting yourself on the line for one in need!

Paul drops out of the Acts narrative for what amounts to five or so years.³ Meanwhile, the Acts narrative tells us that the church has spread beyond the

² Paul tells us in Galatians 1:18-19 that his apostolic interaction was mainly 15 days with Peter. Paul also saw James, the brother of Jesus during this time.

bounds we knew earlier. Luke tells us that the church had spread as far as Antioch, ironically because of the persecution that “arose over Stephen.”⁴ When word reached the apostles that the church was growing greatly, not only among Hebrew Jews, but also among Hellenists, the church sent Barnabas to Antioch.

Barnabas did his work as “a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and of faith” (Acts 11:24) and even more were added to the church. Barnabas saw an opportunity and a need! So, “Barnabas went to Tarsus to look for Saul, and when he had found him, he brought him to Antioch. For a whole year they met with the church and taught a great many people. And in Antioch, the disciples were first called Christians” (Acts 11:25-26).

This was the start of many co-workings between Paul and Barnabas. The two went to Jerusalem to help the church during famine several years later (Acts 11:30). Once their visit was complete, they left to return to Antioch taking with them John Mark, Barnabas’s cousin.

Friendship involves time together – it does not just “happen”

Paul soon made a third visit to Jerusalem that Luke leaves out of his Acts narrative, but we learn of it in Paul’s letter to the Galatians. This “fourteen year visit” (Gal. 2:1) was Paul and Barnabas together.⁵ Here, they got the blessings of the Jerusalem “pillars,” James, John and Peter for their work and gospel among the Gentiles (Gal. 2:9).

In spite of that support offered in Jerusalem, Peter came to Antioch and Paul found Peter making choices before the Gentile and Jewish communities that Paul considered hypocritical. Paul writes, “even Barnabas was led astray by their hypocrisy” (Gal. 2:13). With this happening to his friend, and the gospel itself,

³ For example, see the chronology of McRay, John, *Paul, His Life and Teaching*, (Baker Academic 2003) at 74. During this time, Paul tells us in Galatians he also spent time in Syria (Gal. 1:21 “Then I went into the regions of Syria and Cilicia [which is where Tarsus was]”).

⁴ Paul involved himself in the stoning of Stephen to stomp out the church. Paul’s efforts – pre-revelation on Damascus—actually worked to further the church beyond Jerusalem!

⁵ Paul also brought Titus on this trip (Gal.2:1). Titus was an uncircumcised Greek that Paul likely knew through his teachings at Antioch (Gal. 2:3). Titus becomes a long time friend and co-worker of Paul. Paul writes to Titus some 20 years later, a book we call simply “Titus.” But in the intervening time, Paul uses Titus to carry messages (2 Corinthians 12:18). Titus was not just a friend, but also Paul’s “partner” (2 Cor. 8:23). Paul finds great “comfort” in his friendship with Titus (2 Cor. 7:6). The relationship was not just one way. Paul looked for and looked out for Titus (2 Cor. 2:13). Paul and Titus worked out of a common heart (2 Cor. 8:16). We have a good snapshot of Paul as a faithful and loyal friend simply by looking at the verses that teach us of Titus.

Paul did not stand still. Paul “opposed him [Peter] to his face” for conduct that “was not in step with the gospel” (Gal. 2:14).

We can fairly deduce from this account that Paul was upset and concerned over what he knew was conduct that was not only flatly contradicted by the gospel but was also misleading others into hypocrisy. Paul confronts this problem, as recorded in his letter to the Galatians (who are likely experiencing many of the same or similar issues). Although our reading of the story seems as if Paul was harsh in his dealings with Peter, we can likely conclude that Paul was not. Paul writes rather harshly to convey the stark errors and the serious repercussions of those errors to the Galatians. This is the same letter, however, where Paul says, “Brothers, if anyone is caught in any transgression, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness.” Paul, perhaps thinking of how Peter had led Barnabas astray, then adds, “keep watch on yourself, lest you be tempted” (Gal. 6:1).

Paul’s role here is the picture meant by the passage in Ecclesiastes 4:10, “If one falls down, his friend can help him up. But pity the man who falls and has no one to help him up!”.

Friendship does not allow sin without gentle help followed by forgiveness!

What happened next? Did Paul decide his friend Barnabas was untrustworthy? Was Barnabas unfit for God’s purposes and Paul’s companionship? Of course not. In Acts 13, Luke lets us know that fairly soon after this time, some members of the Antioch church had a vision of Paul and Barnabas being set apart for some works of God. Paul and Barnabas together head out on what scholars now call “Paul’s first missionary journey.” It is worth noting that the missionary journey began at Barnabas’s home – the island of Cyprus!

For several chapters, we read of events that transpired on this venture. Later lessons allow us to cover these missionary adventures more fully. For now, we should note that the trip was a great success, although with a glitch! Paul and Barnabas had taken with them as “their helper” John Mark (Acts 13:5). Early on in the trip, John Mark left Paul and Barnabas and returned to Jerusalem (Acts 13:13). This would later be a problem! Notwithstanding John Mark’s early exit, God’s hand moved and the church grew throughout the regions where Paul and Barnabas worked together.

After the trip, Paul and Barnabas have a chance to go to Jerusalem and fill in the church on how it went. Luke writes, “and all the assembly fell silent, and they listened to Barnabas and Paul as they related what signs and wonders God had done through them among the Gentiles”

Friendship is not possessive. Friends are happy when others join the circle as friends.

(Acts 15:11-13). The Jerusalem church now sends out some others with Paul and Barnabas to communicate their thoughts with the church in Antioch. At this point, the church writes a letter calling both Paul and Barnabas (okay, the church listed Barnabas first!) “dear friends” (Acts 15:25). Through the work of Barnabas, God has moved Paul into a warm place in the hearts of those who years earlier lived in fear of him!

Paul and Barnabas continued their joint ministry teaching in Antioch, but after a while, Paul suggested to Barnabas that they return and strengthen the churches they started on their first missionary trip. Barnabas wanted to go, but wanted to take John Mark again. Paul would not hear of it. Luke says, “Paul thought it best not to take with them one who had withdrawn from them in Pamphylia and had not gone with them to the work” (Acts 15:38). These two long friends, co-workers for years, could not work out the problem. “And there arose a sharp disagreement, so that they separated from each other” (Acts 15:39). Paul took Silas and Barnabas took Mark and they went their separate ways.

Was that it? Did this “sharp disagreement” end their friendship? We do not know details, but we know enough to answer this question, “No!” Just four years later, Paul would write the Corinthians and speak of Barnabas in positive ways that indicate to the Corinthians that Paul thought of Barnabas much as he thought of himself. Also, the passage may indicate that both Paul and Barnabas had both worked in Corinth (1 Cor. 9:6: “Is it only I and Barnabas who must work for a living?”).

What of John Mark? We know that seven or eight years after Paul started the missionary journey refusing to bring Mark along, Paul writes a letter to the Colossian church indicating Paul was working with Mark (“Aristarchus my fellow prisoner greets you, and Mark the cousin of Barnabas (concerning whom you have received instructions— if he comes to you, welcome him)” Col. 4:10.) Nearly ten years later, as Paul is in the final years of his life, Paul writes to Timothy, “Luke alone is with me. Get Mark and bring him with you, for he is very useful to me for ministry” (2 Tim. 4:11).

Friendship can involve differences in opinion and action, even sharp disagreement, without the loss of the relationship!

POINTS FOR HOME

It is not fair stopping this lesson looking merely at Barnabas, Titus, and Mark. Paul had many other friends, some of which figure heavily in his ministry during his life and after! But, time requires we stop this lesson here and leave those other friends for another class.

What do we learn from these relations and interactions?

1. Friendship is important, and it goes beyond mere companionship. The proverbs have a lot of wisdom offered on these issues. “A man of many companions may come to ruin, but there is a friend who sticks closer than a brother” (Pro. 18:24). We need friends, in times of joy, and especially in times of trouble. “A friend loves at all times and a brother is born for adversity” (Pro. 17:17). How do we get these friends?⁶ The global answer is to “love God” and “love your neighbor as yourself.” But the more practical answer is to find other people that you can serve and serve them! Minister to them! Become their friend by what you do for them! How do you find these folks? Get involved! Get involved in Sunday School beyond merely attending. Find a Ladies’ Bible study or a Men’s Bible study group. Get in a Connection Group. Find the Christians at work or school. Then, spend time with them and minister to them. Watch the friendship grow.
2. While we are on the subject of how to make friends, consider Jesus again as friend. “What a friend we have in Jesus, all our sins and griefs to bear. What a privilege to carry everything to God in prayer.” Jesus as friend? It happens when you spend time with him in prayer, study, and service. Jesus said, “You are my friends if you do what I command” (Jn 15:14). Jesus desires us to be friends. He added, “I no longer call you servants...Instead I have called you friends...You did not choose me, but I chose you” (Jn 16:15-16). If you wish to be better friends with Jesus, or anyone else, invest your time and energy into them. The principle is true that, “For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also” (Mt. 6:21).
3. Thank God for your friends. “Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights” (James 1:17). But, pick your friends carefully! “Do not be deceived: ‘bad company corrupts good morals’ (1 Cor. 15:33).

⁶ C. S. Lewis wrote to Arthur Greeves, his lifelong friend on December 29, 1935, “Friendship is the greatest of worldly goods. Certainly to me it is the chief happiness of life. If I had to give a piece of advice to a young man about a place to live, I think I should say, ‘Sacrifice almost everything to live where you can be near your friends.’ I know I am very fortunate in that respect.”