

6

ENCOURAGE ONE ANOTHER



When have you seen something go viral?

QUESTION #1

#BSFLrelationships

BIBLE STUDIES FOR LIFE **53**

THE POINT

Encourage people in their relationships with Christ and one another.



THE BIBLE MEETS LIFE

Until recently, not many people were familiar with amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS), also called Lou Gehrig's disease—an incurable, progressive, muscle-weakening disease that ultimately ends in death. Then the ice-bucket challenge emerged in the summer of 2014. People were challenged to pour a bucket of ice and water on their heads to raise awareness for ALS and encourage donations for research. Whoever did this challenge could then challenge others.

Thanks to videos being posted on social media, the idea went viral. People all over the country and around the world jumped on the bandwagon and took the challenge. By the end of 2014, few did not know about this fatal disease. More importantly, over \$100 million was raised, allowing research efforts to be tripled.

The early Christians didn't need an ice-bucket challenge to motivate them to share Christ. They had the message of life, and they were eager to spread the good news. In the Book of Acts, we meet a man named Barnabas who took the challenge to follow Christ and then spent his life encouraging others to do the same.

WHAT DOES THE BIBLE SAY?

Acts 11:19-21

¹⁹ Now those who had been scattered as a result of the persecution that started because of Stephen made their way as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus, and Antioch, speaking the word to no one except Jews. ²⁰ But there were some of them, men from Cyprus and Cyrene, who came to Antioch and began speaking to the Greeks also, proclaiming the good news about the Lord Jesus. ²¹ The Lord's hand was with them, and a large number who believed turned to the Lord.

Two characteristics stood out about the church in its earliest days: it was a movement among Jews, and it was largely confined to Jerusalem. All of that changed when Stephen was killed (see Acts 7:58–8:1). Stephen was the first martyr in the church, and his death sparked a wave of persecution against Christians in Jerusalem. As a result, believers scattered throughout Judea and Samaria. Thankfully, “Those who were scattered went on their way preaching the word” (Acts 8:4).

Our passage mentions that believers scattered to three places in particular: Phoenicia, Cyprus, and Antioch. They shared the gospel in these places, but they shared it with “no one except Jews.” Why? Because many of the early Christians viewed their faith in Christ as a natural extension of their Jewish heritage. In other words, sharing the gospel with Jewish people was in their comfort zone.

That approach changed in Antioch, where some believers “began speaking to the Greeks also, proclaiming the good news about the Lord Jesus.” The good news pushed them out of their comfort zones and spurred them to talk with people who weren't like themselves.

This shows us that difficulties and persecution are not barriers to sharing the gospel. Without a doubt, these early Christians faced persecution, but they allowed that persecution to push them into new areas of evangelism. Wherever they went, they encouraged people to follow Christ.

Why do we sometimes shy away from certain groups of people when sharing the gospel?

QUESTION #2

Acts 11:22-24

²² News about them reached the church in Jerusalem, and they sent out Barnabas to travel as far as Antioch. ²³ When he arrived and saw the grace of God, he was glad and encouraged all of them to remain true to the Lord with devoted hearts, ²⁴ for he was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and of faith. And large numbers of people were added to the Lord.

People need leadership. Teams need coaches, businesses need CEOs, and churches need pastors. The early church had the leadership it needed in Jerusalem, and those good leaders sought to encourage other churches and ensure they were teaching and growing as they should. That's why they sent Barnabas to Antioch.

Barnabas was an ideal choice for several reasons. He was from Cyprus (see 4:36), as were some of the believers who initiated the movement of God in Antioch. This also meant Barnabas was a Hellenist—a Jew whose language and culture was more Greek than Hebrew. These things positioned him well to assess what God was doing among the Gentiles.

Once in Antioch, Barnabas did three key things:

- 1. He saw the grace of God at work.** Why did Barnabas see God's grace? He was looking for it! God is working even now; we simply need the eyes to see.
- 2. He rejoiced.** When we focus on seeing God at work, we're drawn to praise Him. Barnabas's spiritual eyes and joyful heart naturally led him to do the third thing.
- 3. He encouraged.** Barnabas was a consistent source of encouragement to others. His true name was Joseph, but he had such a habit of encouraging others he was renamed Barnabas, which meant "son of encouragement" (4:36).

GIVE IT A TRY

Choose one of the following scenarios and record how you would offer encouragement to the person described. Be specific in the approach you would take and the words you would say.

1. Your friend has been out of work for several months and recently missed out on another job opportunity.
2. Your brother's last child just moved out of the house, and he's trying to adjust to living as an empty-nester.
3. A young couple that recently moved into your community has started attending your church and your Bible study group.



Why is encouraging others a necessary part of following Jesus?

Barnabas's actions grew out of his character. The text says "he was a good man"—someone who consistently treated others with love and dignity. He was also "full of the Holy Spirit and faith." When Luke wrote the Book of Acts, he used a similar description for Stephen (see 6:5). This is a fitting description of a person who totally trusts God and lives surrendered to the power and work of the Holy Spirit.

Hopefully, we all have a "Barnabas" in our lives—someone who encourages us to grow closer to Christ. At the very least, we can ensure our friends and family members have a "Barnabas" in their lives if we determine to be people of encouragement ourselves.

Acts 11:25-26

²⁵ Then he went to Tarsus to search for Saul, ²⁶ and when he found him he brought him to Antioch. For a whole year they met with the church and taught large numbers. The disciples were first called Christians at Antioch.

The church in Antioch was growing "and large numbers of people were added to the Lord" (11:24). Barnabas needed help, and he knew who he wanted: Saul (whom we know as the apostle Paul).

Barnabas was already familiar with Saul, having befriended and supported him after his experience on the road to Damascus. It's likely that Paul spent about ten years preaching in Syria and Cilicia—the area of his hometown (see Gal. 1:21-23)—after his conversion.

So Barnabas "went to Tarsus to search for Saul."

One of the best ways to encourage people to serve and minister is to let them work alongside us. Jesus did this with His twelve apostles; Saul (later called Paul) would do it with others like Silas, Timothy,

Who has made a spiritual investment in your life?

QUESTION #3

When have you been challenged to leave your comfort zone as a disciple of Jesus?

QUESTION #4

and Luke (see Acts 15:40; 16:1-3,10-17; 20:5-15; 21:1-18; 27:1–28:16). And that’s exactly what Barnabas did, as well. Saul was not a novice to ministry. He had been preaching and teaching, but now Barnabas brought him to Antioch to help with the church. Together “they met with the church and taught large numbers.”

Saul already had a missionary zeal, and Barnabas was always looking for opportunities to encourage others to come to Christ. The church at Antioch had also been blessed with several other learned prophets and teachers. Under their collective leadership, it’s no surprise this church was the first the Holy Spirit called to send out a missionary team—and that team was none other than Barnabas and Saul (see 13:2).

Notice the pattern of Barnabas’s encouragement of Saul. Barnabas had been the one who sought out “Saul—also called Paul” (v. 9). They served together in the beginning as “Barnabas and Saul.” As their ministry progressed, however, Paul took the more prominent role. Over time, they became “Paul and Barnabas” (v. 43). Barnabas was quite willing to step back and allow Paul to take the lead.

How can we encourage others to step up and serve? As we follow the example of Barnabas, we can:

- ▶ **Let the person watch.** When you’re teaching and mentoring, start by modeling what to do. For example, let the person observe you sharing your faith.
- ▶ **Serve together.** Let the person participate and lead right alongside you.
- ▶ **Hand off.** Let the person do the task or ministry on his or her own. You’ve mentored, trained, and guided. Now let the person run with it, but always be there with encouragement and praise.

Encouraging people brings great value wherever we go, both inside and outside the church. Make the choice to encourage others in their relationships with Christ and in their fellowship with one another.



What are some advantages in doing God’s work together?

QUESTION #5

LIVE IT OUT

We are surrounded by people who need encouragement. What will you do to encourage others to grow in Christ and serve Him?

- ▶ **A note of thanks.** Identify one person who has encouraged you. Write a note to him or her and express your gratitude for that help and encouragement.
- ▶ **A word of encouragement.** Take time this week to encourage someone in their walk with Christ. Make a call, write a note, or come alongside someone you know needs a word of support.
- ▶ **A relationship of encouragement.** Develop an ongoing relationship with someone that includes regular meetings. Mentor this person in a particular area of life and encourage his or her growth in Christ.



Are you ready to see encouragement and support go viral in your church? In your community? If so, you can be the catalyst by choosing to encourage those around you to grow in Christ and grow together as the body of Christ.

My thoughts

Share with others how you will live out this study: **#BSFLrelationships**



HORIZONTAL JESUS

BY TONY EVANS

Several years ago, my children gave me an iPad for Christmas. I had received a gift full of power that was literally right at my finger tips. If I needed a camera, a flashlight, a calendar, directions, or a reminder, this one thing would do it all for me. It was good for everything.

To be honest, though, I didn't fully understand it. I wasn't an iPad guy. So, I was missing out on the full experience of what I'd been given instead of maximizing its potential.

Many of us do the same thing with God's all-sufficient gift of grace. What we have been given in Jesus brings the indescribable power of God down from the heavenly realms and puts the inexhaustible supply of God's goodness at our fingertips.

The Vertical Power of God's Gift

In order to tap in to this inexhaustible supply of God's grace, you have to access it vertically through our Heavenly Father above.

Now don't misunderstand. Is God's love unconditional? Yes. Is God's grace free? Yes. Do we have any effect on our salvation other than believing in Christ alone through faith alone? No. But is our experience of God's power and blessing in our lives at times influenced by our interactions with one another? Yes, it is.

For instance, the electric company is giving you all the power you need for anything in your home. But they aren't going to come over and turn on the light switch or operate your appliances. The electric company has provided the power. You have to access it.

The same is true for the unlimited grace God has supplied. Unlike electricity, however, the price for your access to grace has already been paid in full. Jesus Christ took your debt and nailed it to the cross (see Col. 2:14). In return, God's Word reveals that we are to "walk in the light as he himself is in the light" (1 John 1:7). It also says that you're fooling yourself if you don't think that the way you treat other people affects God's posture toward you.

Don't you want the opportunity to experience more of God? I want every bit of God that He's willing to give to me in my lifetime. If how I treat others can affect my experience of Him, then I want to do whatever I can to maximize that experience.

Our Spiritual Connection

God designed us with connection in mind. The New Testament includes the best illustration of why horizontal and vertical connection is so important: "Now you are the body of Christ, and individual members of it" (1 Cor. 12:27).

When God wanted to draw a clear mental picture of connectivity, He used something anyone can identify with—a body. Each of us knows that the body does what the mind tells it to do. Any other behavior is unhealthy and problematic. Scripture describes Christ as the head of the church, which is His body (see Col. 1:18). Therefore, our job as Jesus' body is to reflect His character and obey His commands. Only when you and I are properly aligned and doing the will of our Lord do we rightly function and experience the fullness of life.

The Bible goes on to describe how we are connected: "A manifestation of the Spirit is given to each person for the common good" (1 Cor. 12:7). The Holy Spirit is our lifeblood as God's power flows to the various parts of the body. But if my hand, or your hand, is out of joint, it doesn't get the transfer of life. Neither do we get the full manifestation of the Spirit in our lives when we're disconnected from one another. God's power flows through connectivity. We can't experience life simply by being in proximity to one another. We must be connected to one another.

“But as it is, God has arranged each one of the parts in the body just as he wanted. And if they were all the same part, where would the body be? As it is, there are many parts, but one body” (1 Cor. 12:18-20).

Friend, you’re a vital part in the body of Christ. You’re an important piece of God’s bigger plan. Anyone who has lost vision or hearing can tell you the importance of every single part of the body. The body needs every part—and those parts need to work together.

“You are blessed to be a blessing. You can also be blessed because you are a blessing.”

Living As Horizontal Jesus

You are created in the image of God, and He intends for you to reveal His goodness as He conforms you into the likeness of His Son. “Let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven” (Matt. 5:16).

The way you treat others should always point them to your Heavenly Father. They benefit as you reflect the image of Christ to them, and you benefit by experiencing God more fully. It enriches and deepens your vertical relationship with God when you love, forgive, serve, encourage, admonish, and comfort others. It’s a win-win scenario.

When God knows He can flow through you horizontally, He will flow even more to you vertically. But the moment the Father sees His blessings stopping with you instead of being shared with others, continuing to pour blessings into your life isn’t in anyone’s best interest. It isn’t healthy or helpful. It may even be hurtful. You are blessed to be a blessing. You can also be blessed because you are a blessing.

Jesus said that He came to give us an abundant life (see John 10:10). This life is as simple as loving God and loving your neighbor as yourself (see Luke 10:27). Notice I said it’s simple. I didn’t say it’s easy. Only when you give yourself away do you make room for the overflowing abundance God has in store for you (see Luke 6:38).

Friend, if you want to experience more of God vertically, then you must be actively involved with others horizontally. You must be the visible expression of Christ’s love to other members of the family of God. The two are tied together hand in hand. The church is the body of Christ in this world. When you are a horizontal Jesus to others around you, everyone is positioned to experience more of the power and presence of God.

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