

WRITTEN TEACHING

Value: The Relationship Made by the Spirit

A teaching from the Book of Acts, tracing the story of Paul, Barnabas, and John Mark — and the difference between relationships made by flesh and blood and those forged by the Spirit.

Acts 9 · 11 · 13–15 • Mark 3 · 10 • John 7 • Colossians 4 • 2 Timothy 4

When Saul returned from Damascus to Jerusalem, no one believed he had truly changed. Not long before, he had left for Damascus to hunt down Christians and drag them back in chains; now he claimed to be one of them. The disciples assumed it was a ploy — a way to infiltrate the church and gain access to the hidden apostles. Only one man believed him: Barnabas.

It was an enormous risk. If Saul's conversion had been false, Barnabas would have personally handed the apostles over to their enemy. For Barnabas to take that risk and be right, it had to be more than his own judgment at work — it had to be the same Spirit that had already convinced Ananias, back in Damascus, to lay hands on the very man he feared. Barnabas was vindicated. Saul began preaching so boldly in Jerusalem that the same plot that had chased him out of Damascus formed again, and the believers sent him home to Tarsus for his own safety.

The Birth of "Christians" in Antioch

Years later, word reached Jerusalem that something remarkable was happening among the Gentiles in Antioch. The church sent Barnabas to investigate. When he arrived and saw the grace of God at work, he didn't return home for reinforcements from among the twelve apostles in Jerusalem, men with towering reputations, who had seen the Lord face to face. Instead, he went looking for Saul in Tarsus.

That decision is worth pausing on. Barnabas had already proven his discernment once, being the sole believer in Saul's conversion. Now he was proving it again — recognizing in Saul something the Jerusalem

apostles, however credentialed, could not supply for what Antioch needed. Barnabas brought Saul to Antioch, and the two of them taught there for a full year. It was in Antioch, not Jerusalem, that believers were first called *Christians* — Christ-like — because it was there that the full, undiluted character of Christ was finally being reflected: eating with tax collectors, welcoming the woman anointing His feet, meeting the Samaritan woman at the well. That Christ, not a filtered version of Him, was what Antioch now displayed to the world.

A Relationship Tested by Fire

The Holy Spirit later set Barnabas and Saul apart officially for missionary work (Acts 13), and what followed was a relentless string of trials. In Cyprus, they confronted the sorcerer Elymas. In Antioch of Pisidia, initial success gave way to expulsion after jealous opponents stirred up persecution. In Iconium, the city split for and against them, and they fled a plot to stone them. In Lystra, after healing a man crippled from birth, the crowd first tried to worship them as gods, then — incited by pursuers who had followed them from Antioch and Iconium — stoned Paul and left him for dead outside the city. Through every one of these cities, the relationship between Paul and Barnabas held. It endured stoning, slander, expulsion, and mistaken worship, and it kept bearing fruit regardless.

John Mark's Departure

Early in that journey, at Perga in Pamphylia, their young assistant John Mark — Barnabas's cousin — left them and returned home to Jerusalem. He did not stay to face what came next: the opposition in Antioch of Pisidia, in Iconium, in Lystra where Paul was stoned. Whatever maturing those trials were meant to produce in him, he opted out of it, choosing comfort and familiar surroundings over the harder road.

The Dispute

When it came time for a second journey, Barnabas wanted to bring John Mark again. Paul refused. His argument was simple: the man had deserted them once already, at exactly the point where the work required endurance. He had not completed what he'd started, and an unfinished ministry does not qualify someone to carry others through the same fire. As Ephesians 4 puts it, the work of ministry itself is what perfects and matures believers — and John Mark had walked away from precisely that process.

Scripture doesn't soften what happened next: *"the contention was so sharp between them that they departed asunder one from the other"* (Acts 15:39). Barnabas took Mark and sailed to Cyprus. Paul took Silas and went on through Syria and Cilicia. What the Holy Spirit had joined together in Acts 13, human loyalty now pulled apart.

The Error Beneath the Error

Here is the real weight of the story: Barnabas could not discern between two very different kinds of relationship — one made by flesh and blood, the other made by the Spirit. John Mark was his family: his sister Mary had taken Barnabas in when he first arrived in Jerusalem, and John Mark had grown up in that household. That bond, formed by kinship and years of comfort, blinded Barnabas to what had already been proven in the fire: that his relationship with Paul, forged and tested through stoning, slander, and expulsion, was the one that had shown itself trustworthy — while his relationship with his own nephew had already failed once, at the very first real test.

A man full of the Holy Spirit, present at Saul's earliest and most doubted moment, could still fail to see this. It is not a matter of spiritual credentials alone. It is a matter of what we choose to value when the two loyalties are placed side by side.

What Jesus Said About This Exact Choice

This is not a new problem. When Jesus was told, *"Your mother and your brothers are outside asking for you,"* He replied, *"Whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother, and sister, and mother"* (Matthew 12:47-50). And in John 7:1-5, when His own brothers urged Him to go up to the feast in Judea and make a public show of Himself, John notes plainly: *"For neither did his brothers believe in him."* Jesus did not organize His life around family loyalty that lacked faith. He placed value where the Spirit had already proven itself — among those who believed and obeyed, regardless of bloodline.

The Hundredfold That Barnabas Missed

Jesus made an explicit promise in Mark 10:29-30: whoever leaves house, brothers, sisters, mother, father, children, or land for His sake *"shall receive a hundredfold now in this time... with persecutions."* Paul and Barnabas had already been living this out. In every city that persecuted them — Antioch of Pisidia, Iconium, Lystra — they had gained new spiritual sons and daughters, a hundredfold of what any

single blood relative could offer. Barnabas, in choosing his nephew over the tested, Spirit-forged partnership with Paul, walked away from the very harvest already in his hands.

What Became of Each of Them

Barnabas is never heard from again in Scripture after Acts 15. A man once called "the son of encouragement," who had sold his land in Cyprus and laid the proceeds at the apostles' feet, who was the first to believe in Saul when no one else would — simply disappears from the record, remaining in Cyprus, evidently pursued more by comfort and favor with an old friend (the proconsul Sergius Paulus) than by the ongoing fire of ministry.

John Mark, by contrast, repented. Paul later instructs the Colossian church to welcome him if he comes (Colossians 4:10), and by 2 Timothy 4:11, Paul is telling Timothy directly: *"Take Mark, and bring him with thee: for he is profitable to me for the ministry."* The one who had once quit at the first sign of hardship returned, matured, and became useful precisely where he had once failed.

The Question This Leaves Us With

Which relationship do you place more value on — the one created by flesh and blood, or the one created and proven by the Spirit? Barnabas had every spiritual credential imaginable, and still failed this exact test. The relationship the Spirit forges and proves through trial is the one meant to be treasured above comfort, familiarity, and even close kinship — not because family bonds don't matter, but because only one of these two relationships carries the promise of a hundredfold return.

In the name of Jesus.

✦ Branch of Righteousness

"I in them, and You in Me, that they may be made perfect in one." — John 17:23

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