Be a Human Infusion of Hope

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> Encourage one another and build one another up. (1 Thessalonians 5:11)

His name was Joseph. But he “was also called by the apostles Barnabas (which means son of encouragement)” (Acts 4:36). Joseph. Barnabas. I guess that would make him “Joe Encouragement.” Wouldn’t it be wonderful to be such an encouraging person that your friends simply call you Encouragement?

Courage is the resolve to face a fearful threat. And courage is fueled by hope — a hope in something stronger than what we fear.

Discouragement sets in when our hope leaks. We begin to cower before our fear. When this process happens, and it happens often, we need an infusion of hope. That’s what encouragement is. Barnabas went around giving people hope-infusions, which helped them keep fighting the fight of faith (1 Timothy 6:12).

We need Barnabas people. We need to *be* a Barnabas.

A Deluge of Discouragement

We live in a deluge of discouragement. Criticism, contempt, critique, and correction. It’s the native language of our fallen world. These things roll easily off the human tongue far more than affirmation and encouragement, because the fallen human heart has an abundance of pride (Matthew 12:34).

We human beings are by sinful nature viciously critical of one another. We’ve even made “critic” a profession. The vast majority of the analyses of people, ideas, organizations, movements, and governments we hear, whether in the press, on blogs, or at the table next to us, are negative. (Brace yourself for another presidential election cycle.) There are, of course, things that legitimately need critique and correction. But the overabundance of negativity is largely due to the fact that the prideful eye of the fallen human heart is trained to see others’ weaknesses, foibles, mistakes, and sins. It looks for them and relishes in them. It even sees ones that aren’t there. Why are we like this?

Ironically, one reason is that we are all looking for hope for ourselves. Courage comes from hope. Discouragement sets in when hope leaks. So we sinful humans are on the lookout for any reason to lighten our own discouragement and the guilt of our own failings and sins.

When faith in the gospel of the grace of the God of encouragement (Romans 15:5) is absent or deficient in our hearts, we look to others' failings and sins to make ourselves feel better.

We should not be surprised that this is the case. What else would we expect from a culture in a world under the governance of the evil one (1 John 5:19)?

And we should not even be surprised when the church falls into a disproportionate amount of discouraging negativity. Our remaining indwelling sin is bent in this way and Christians are under constant assault by spiritual forces of evil (Ephesians 6:12). Critical discernment is necessary for spiritual survival.

But in the chaos of the battle, we can easily wound each other with critical friendly fire and forget that encouragement is also necessary for spiritual survival.

Encouragement Is Spiritual Warfare

Encouragement is spiritual warfare. If we're going to encourage anyone, we will have to fight Satan and our own sin to do it.

The devil is constantly trying to discourage us. He's the "the accuser of [the] brothers . . . who accuses them day and night before our God" (Revelation 12:10). And his minions are frequently throwing "flaming darts" of condemnation and jealousy and resentment at us (Ephesians 6:16). Resist them (1 Peter 5:9)!

And our sin nature wants to discourage others. It desires self-exaltation more than anything. So it relishes focusing on others' weaknesses and sins out of arrogance or envy. Pride is why so much of what we think or say or interpret or hear about others is negative and uncharitably critical.

But the "God of encouragement" (Romans 15:5) has given us the weapon that is designed to defeat these enemies: "the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God" (Ephesians 6:17). The Bible was "written for our instruction, that . . . through the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope" (Romans 15:4). And when we have hope, we will have courage.

A Call for Barnabas People

Joseph was called Barnabas most likely because he had an eye trained to see the grace of God in whatever happened. No matter what theological controversy or persecution or financial crisis or criticism or failure, Barnabas had a resilient hope in God. When some threat

discouraged his friends, he would consistently remind them of God's promises in such a contagiously hopeful way that their courage would revive.

And that's what we want to be like. We need to be Barnabas people.

Barnabas people are those who soak in and store up God's word (Psalm 119:11) and, by doing so, are able to walk and talk by the Spirit (Galatians 5:16). And when they talk, they tend to only speak what "is good for building up, as fits the occasion, that it may give grace to those who hear" (Ephesians 4:29).

This is not a simplistic call to stop thinking critically and be nice to each other. After all, Barnabas, the paragon of encouragement, clearly had a backbone. He went toe-to-toe with Paul over Mark (Acts 15:36–39). But he was characterized by encouragement, not combativeness or critique.

So this is a call for us to cultivate a culture of encouragement wherever we are. It's a call for us to become Barnabas people, odd people who are so characterized by being encouraging that it becomes part of our identity. Barnabas people give grace to those who hear them. They are at-large hope-infusers to the discouraged.

If you need help in becoming a Barnabas person (like I do), one of the best, most practical things I've ever read on encouraging others is *Practicing Affirmation* by Sam Crabtree. Sam is a Barnabas, and a maker of Barnabas people.

But becoming a Barnabas person really begins by asking the God of encouragement to transform us into sons of encouragement who have Spirit-empowered discernment so that we leave whomever we interact with today more encouraged than we found them.

"Therefore encourage one another with these words" (1 Thessalonians 4:18).