

# Becoming a Servant of Encouragement: Risk

Acts 9:23-27

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So, I want to tell you more about Barnabas. He was truly a mentor and encourager. But there was more than one occasion when he needed to put himself at risk to help another disciple of Jesus grow in their faith.

Today's lesson involves the man who wrote letters to various churches and we know him as Paul. But in these early moments of his life he is called Saul. Saul's story is dependent upon Barnabas. Saul was a Jew that hated Christians. First, he believed they were blaspheming the name of God by proclaiming Jesus as God's Son. Second, He believed that they needed to be stopped.

He stood by and watched with approval as a Christian was put to death. He has already been so successful at pursuing and arresting Christians that many were leaving Jerusalem and going to other cities. He had gone to the High Priest and Jewish leaders for approval to travel to other cities and arrest Christians.

He set out for the city of Damascus to find Christians and bring them back to Jerusalem. But while He was on the road a miracle happened as Jesus appeared to him, blinded him, and told him to stop persecuting Christians.

Saul went into Damascus and for three days prayed until a Christian came and prayed over him. His sight was restored and he began to proclaim to the astonishment of all that Jesus was the Messiah. Then about three years later something happened.

***Acts 9:23–27 (NLT) After a while some of the Jews plotted together to kill him. They were watching for him day and night at the city gate so they could murder him, but Saul was told about their plot. So during the night, some of the other believers lowered him in a large basket through an opening in the city wall. When Saul arrived in Jerusalem, he tried to meet with the believers, but they were all afraid of him. They did not believe he had truly become a believer! Then Barnabas brought him to the apostles and told them how Saul had seen the Lord on the way to Damascus and how the Lord had spoken to Saul. He also told them that Saul had preached boldly in the name of Jesus in Damascus.***

**Sometimes Christians need to take a step of faith and be at risk.** Can you feel the tension, the dramatic actions taking place? This feels like it should have suspenseful music playing in the background. There is such anticipation and expectation in these verses.

As the Jewish leaders layout their scheme to kill this newly appointed servant of God we see the anger. The guards patrol the gates like a concentration camp, checking people to see if one of them might be this apostle of Jesus. Then the friends, the other believers, coming up with their own plan of letting the basket down the outside of the wall isn't even the climax. All this happens in the cover of darkness. There is great secrecy, there is uncertainty, there is fear. But, the drama doesn't need even though this evangelist has come to Jerusalem, the birth place of the faith, because the believers are

fearful. This man's former life has proceeded him. It's as if everyone is holding their breathe, sitting on the edge of their seat.

Then along comes Joseph, the encourager. This man who came to Jerusalem with faith in Jesus and ministered to the poor, who ministered to the believers, whom the apostles called Barnabas. To defend Saul, Barnabas was risking his own place in the church. But Saul needed a sponsor. Saul had been a persecutor of the believers. But, Jesus entered his life and he was a changed man. He was no longer the person he once was.

Barnabas lived up to his name as he encouraged Saul and the apostles. He could have stood by and said nothing. He could have done nothing. But, he stood strong in his faith and calling from Jesus. He stood beside Saul and spoke to Peter, the leader of the disciples, and James the brother of Jesus. Barnabas gave testimony, confirmation of the power of Jesus to forgive.

For you and I it's most often just talking about Jesus' blessing us. It's talking about Jesus providing for your daily needs. You got up this morning, you have roof over your head, and have food on your table. For us it's talking about the hope in your heart. Jesus turns your thoughts of despair and discouragement to expectation and promise. It's talking about the peace that no one can explain. When the world is going crazy around you, troubles and problems, Jesus has given you the peace that He is with you. It's talking about the joy in the midst of sorrows. You can't weep and smile at the same time, but you can weep and have joy. The joy of Jesus always leading and protecting. This is not taking a risk. This is trusting Jesus, having faith in Jesus, loving Jesus. What may seem like a risk is really following Jesus.

***So during the night, some of the other believers lowered him in a large basket through an opening in the city wall. Acts 9:25 (NLT)***

**The risk of silence is too often more powerful than being bold and brave.** Silence and inaction are easy when we're afraid. There is moment when we freeze. Our body and our mouth stops working. Our mind is trying to comprehend what our eyes and ears are witnessing. In that instance we breakout from being frozen to either step forward or step backward. I've done it and you've done it.

The reality is we have taken a step backward more often then we've gone forward trusting Jesus. We remain silent, we don't speak, we don't even bite our tongue, because we never let the words form. We don't act because we have already determined that the risk is too great.

I could say this in another less polite way, this is disobedience, this is sin. We don't like thinking about it that way, do we? When the option is to follow Jesus and we don't, that's disobedience. We might come up with a long list of reasons for not stepping out in faith. Everyone of those reasons sounds completely logically and reasonable. At least they sound that way to us.

But, Jesus brought us into the situation to speak and to act. Instead, after freezing you and I became silent and don't act. But, fear of the whatever is not greater than Jesus. Do you remember me telling you how terrified I was of cats? I overcame that irrational fear when I was challenged with these words. Either you believe who Jesus is or you don't.

Imagine what would have happened if everyone remained silent and inactive. If what I just said is true, and I believe that it is true, then we are too quick to believe that Jesus isn't who He says He is. Ouch! I said that out loud.

I'm not saying you have rejected Jesus and the salvation that only comes from Him. I'm saying that I do this and you do this: we don't believe Jesus can speak and act through us. We don't believe that Jesus has the power in our situation. We don't believe that Jesus has authority over our situation.

Remember, we're talking about speaking and acting in the name and the power of Jesus. We're talking about taking the risk to encourage, empower, and enlighten others with Jesus' blessings. Not every situation in life is the moment to beat people with your Bible. But there are some moments when we freeze and our next step needs to be forward, to speak and to act.

Jesus is who He says He is: the Son of God, our Redeemer, our Deliverer, our Savior. Jesus is our hope, our peace, our joy. Jesus isn't fear, or worry, or anxiety. Jesus is our strength, our wisdom, our leader. Jesus our holy God above all things on earth and in heaven. Jesus is the authority over all that is below the earth and above the heavens. He has no equal. He is worthy of our trust and our hope. He is more than capable of giving us the words to say and the actions take.

***When Saul arrived in Jerusalem, he tried to meet with the believers, but they were all afraid of him. They did not believe he had truly become a believer! Acts 9:26 (NLT)***

**Being risky in our faith gives us opportunities to encourage and the power to make a difference.** The opportunities have already been created by the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. In this event Jesus planned to meet Saul on the road to Damascus. Jesus knew that people would be upset with Saul's teaching that Jesus is the Messiah. The Holy Spirit prompted the believers to send Saul over the wall. This was not luck or well planned human activities. This was the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit at work.

So the opportunity for Saul to speak with the apostles in Jerusalem was not an accident. He needed to give a testimony of how Jesus was changing his life. He needed to share the mission Jesus had given to him. This opportunity created by the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit was right in front of the apostles. This would make a significant difference in the world, for the kingdom of God, and for every person who heard Saul.

Initially, the apostles were not hearing opportunity knock or seeing opportunity in front of them. The Holy Spirit worked on someone they knew and respected: Barnabas. He had been one of the early believers, had encouraged many, many people, and was a trusted generous follower of Jesus. Barnabas laid out the whole story, including every detail, and every way the Holy Spirit had been at work.

The testimony of one believer opened the hearts and spirits of the apostles. They in turn became aware of the grace of Jesus, the power of the Holy Spirit, and the will of the Father.

We know the rest of the story, that Saul became known as Paul, he traveled the Roman Empire, he shared the gospel with more people than we know, and he started churches and disciplined many people.

We don't always see the difference, but Jesus knows what happens within people. This may make us hesitate when the opportunity arises. We might justify our inaction by saying, I can't make a difference; it won't matter anyway; I'm just one person.

What did we call that earlier? Why do we do it? Our hesitation, taking a step back instead of step of faith is sin and fear. We've already decided that Jesus isn't who He says He is. We've already made the choice that the Holy Spirit isn't prompting us. We've already given into the idea that this isn't God's plan.

That is, I must say, rather arrogant of us. We know better than God. We see the future better than God. We understand better than God what each person needs. God be merciful to us.

I don't know when the next time the Holy Spirit will prompt me to take a step of faith. We can't create the opportunities, but we can and we must be brave and bold. Someone's relationship with Jesus can be impacted. We may never see the person again. We may never have the opportunity again. Jesus will speak to us and through us so that others can be comforted, encouraged, and challenged in their faith with Jesus.

***Then Barnabas brought him to the apostles and told them how Saul had seen the Lord on the way to Damascus and how the Lord had spoken to Saul. He also told them that Saul had preached boldly in the name of Jesus in Damascus. Acts 9:27 (NLT)***

**Be brave in your faith and risk telling what God has done in your life.** People need to know that Jesus is alive in your life. You and I are different than most of the people we encounter. We are saved from the power of sin, we have been redeemed to a new life in Jesus Christ, we have been delivered by the promise of eternal life in heaven.

People need to know the reason for the peace in our hearts, the joy in our spirits, and the hope in our lives. Even though people don't say it, we have what they need and what they want. People around us – family members, friends, neighbors – may have never heard of Jesus, may misunderstand Jesus, may have tried to run away from Jesus. They still need Jesus, right?

The Holy Spirit is going to prompt you in some situation to speak or act, or both. Remember Jesus is providing this opportunity. God's will must be done on earth as it is in heaven. So, take the risk, the step of faith and speak about what Jesus is doing for you.

Encouraging others with your faith in Jesus brings them one step closer to trusting Jesus. You and I don't know how many times people need to hear that God loves them. We don't know if the people around us know that Jesus lived His life without sin, and died on the cross for us. We don't know if someone we encounter understands that Jesus is alive because He rose from the dead. We don't know if those around us grasp that Jesus at this very moment is calling them to Him. We can't be the judge of when a person has chosen Jesus.

We can put ourselves at risk to speak and to act in the name of Jesus. See the opportunity in front of you, hear the Holy Spirit speaking to you, and take the risk, be brave, be bold, speak the name of Jesus. In His name comfort, encourage, and challenge people with the grace of God.

