

I've done some unthinkable things in my life.

[pause and smile]

And I encourage you to do some of them, too.

All you have to do to accomplish unthinkable things is ... change the way you think!

To the Jews of my time, it was unthinkable to sell your land if you owned any. It was land you likely inherited from your ancestors, and was land you were to pass down to your descendants. Family land was so sacred that it was supposed to be given back to its original owners in the Jubilee year. Many of your ancestors were probably buried on your land, and you were probably going to be buried there, too. As a faithful Jew, I knew there would never be a circumstance under which I would sell my land.

But that was before I watched Peter heal the crippled man. Before I heard Peter preach the Gospel. Before I repented and was baptized. Before I received the Holy Spirit. Before my new brothers and sisters in our little church were starving because they would rather preach the gospel and be faithful Christians than keep their jobs. That was before Jesus became everything to me, and before he caused the Laws of Moses to become null and void because he fulfilled them.¹

When the Holy Spirit told me to sell the land of my ancestors, I did it without hesitation. I sold it in one day. God made sure I got a fair price and got it quickly. I

¹ Mat. 5:17

took the full amount and gave it to the apostles to do with as they thought best. I tried to give it in secret as Jesus commanded,² but the apostles wanted to use me as an example to encourage the others as Jesus also commanded.³ Although almost all of the people were encouraged, there were some who were jealous and acted inappropriately.

That was my first lesson in completely obeying the Holy Spirit ...acting in total honesty. From then, my entire life became oriented to that honesty. Ananias and Sapphira, they did the exact opposite, and the Holy Spirit punished them with death.⁴

It was the land sale that earned my nickname. My real name is Joseph, but the apostles started calling me Barnabas, which means “Son of Encouragement.” Later in my life, some people began calling me an “apostle” which really encouraged me.⁵

I was an integral part of the growth of the early church in Jerusalem, but I was always a bit of an outsider since I was a native of the island of Cyprus, instead of a Jerusalem insider. Little did I know that my knowledge of the world outside of Jerusalem, and my desire to encourage people, would cause me to do more unthinkable things.

Jews from Jerusalem seldom left town. I was familiar with places like Cyprus, Antioch, Caesarea, Damascus and Jerusalem.. important cities... critical stops on important trading routes.

One day, I got a message from my dear friend, Ananias of Damascus. He had been led by the Holy Spirit to affirm to me about the conversion of Saul and how Saul was now preaching the Gospel in a very powerful way. Ananias begged me to accept Saul and encourage him. He told me that one of the reasons the Holy Spirit

² Mat. 6:3-4

³ Mat. 5:16

⁴ Acts 5:1-11

⁵ Acts 14:4

had given me authority and a good reputation was for such a time as this. It was only later that I learned Ananias might have had an ulterior motive for sending Saul away from Damascus.

At this point let me ask for a little grace. For the rest of this story, I want to use Saul's Roman name of Paul, even though it would be on our first missionary journey to Cyprus before this change would actually take root.

Anyway, I did the unthinkable again. I vouched for a man who had previously murdered some of the friends and family members of my Jerusalem church. I used up all the points and influence I had accrued, but it turned out to be a small price to pay. I believe that Paul's short time in Jerusalem was a big part of launching him as the greatest preacher and defender of the Gospel. That short time in Jerusalem built the foundation for my relationship with the man who I would travel and preach with for many years. Unfortunately, Paul offended some people in Jerusalem so badly that they threatened to kill him. We had to rush him off to Caesarea, and then on to his home town of Tarsus.

Did you know that the Holy Spirit promised me that I would be known as a Child of God? He told me, "Barnabas, you know that peacemakers are going to be called children of God.⁶ Your job is to make peace for Paul as much as possible, and I promise you will have plenty of opportunity to earn your new title." The Holy Spirit must have been grinning when he said that. Paul was a piece of work. Stronger than garlic he was. More tactless than a mirror, and I don't mean one of those "through the glass darkly" kind of mirrors.⁷

From the very first day, I started making peace for Paul, and I never finished doing so. It was like he loved to make caustic remarks and offend people with his brilliance. Whenever I tried to calm him down or get him to back off a bit, Saul would just look at me and say, "Barney, Barney, you are just a little thorn in the flesh that the Lord gave me. These people need to hear the truth." If it hadn't been for me, he would've been flogged and jailed many more times than he was.

⁶ Matthew 5:9

⁷ 1 Corinthians 13:12

My career as Paul's peacemaker started simply enough. We Christians in Jerusalem started hearing of the success the scattered Jewish Christians were having in sharing the Gospel. Some of them from my own home of Cyprus had gone to Antioch to share the Word with the Gentiles and were building a flourishing church. Even though Peter had already convinced us it was time to convert Gentiles, we Jewish Christians were still wary.

So, my friends in Jerusalem sent me to find out what was going on. The Lord was blessing the Gospel work tremendously in Antioch, so I just pitched in and helped them grow the church even more. The church in Antioch was the first place we believers started being called "Christians,"⁸ as derogatory as it was favorable originally.

The early Christians acquired several names, some of which are not fit to print. The name Christian was meant to mean "little Christs" or "Christ's people." The other popular name was "The Way."⁹ That name derived from Jesus' revelation that he was the way, the truth, and the life, and nobody could come to the Father except through him.¹⁰ The Romans could easily relate because their very first highway was called the Appian Way. Another name we had was "Nazarenes,"¹¹ in reference to the home of Jesus.

Antioch. There were actually at least sixteen cities named Antioch, named after Antiochus, the son of one successor to Alexander the Great. This Antioch was known as Syrian Antioch or Antioch on the Orontes. It was one of the great cities of the Roman Empire in my time. So major that it was just called Antioch, while the other cities were designated with other names. The city is located on the southern edge of modern day Turkey, about 300 miles from Jerusalem.

⁸ Acts 11:26

⁹ Acts 24:14

¹⁰ John 14:6

¹¹ Acts 24:5

I helped establish the church in Antioch along with some of my friends from Cyprus.¹² For many decades, the church in Antioch was second only to the church in Jerusalem. It played a major role in sending out missionaries and in determining church doctrine. Antioch was an important part of the Christians' understanding that Christ was going to grow his kingdom through his body, the church. *ekklesia*, the Greek word for church, means an assembly. Antioch was the first place that proved the assembly of believers were a community of those who trust in Jesus Christ and gather to express their beliefs, without regard to whether they were Jews or Gentiles. It was the cradle of Gentile Christianity.

Here is the crazy part. The church community is supposed to reflect the community that is found among the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. It is to reflect God's divine nature. They planned the church in eternity past, and we got to see it come into existence.¹³

One last thing... about Antioch. When Paul stayed there, he stayed in the house of Simon and his two sons, Rufus and Alexander.¹⁴ Simon was from Libya, a country in Northern Africa. Simon got to do something that made him famous for all time. He carried the cross for Jesus! He later became a leader in the church at Antioch.¹⁵ You can only imagine the visits he and Paul had.

One day, the Spirit says to me, "Why don't you go find Paul in his hometown of Tarsus, Barney. It's only about 125 miles away from Antioch, Tarsus is a nice place to visit this time of year, and you need the exercise." Sounded good to me, so I went. It was fairly simple to find Paul... he was preaching everywhere and causing havoc. The believers in Tarsus were more than happy for me to take him back to Antioch with me.

We stayed in Antioch for over a year together, and Paul learned a little bit about how to preach in such a way that it would both inform people and encourage

¹² Acts 11:20-21

¹³ Ephesians 3:9-11, 2 Timothy 1:9

¹⁴ Mark 15:21

¹⁵ Acts 13:1-2

them. But, after a year, the believers in Antioch thought it was a good idea for Paul and me to take a contribution back to the Jerusalem church that was suffering from a famine in Israel. Now, I'm not questioning their pure hearts about wanting to help the church in Jerusalem, but they made the contribution amount big enough that Paul felt compelled to leave.

And, while I'm not belittling their gratefulness for the contribution, it wasn't very long before the church at Jerusalem concluded we had finished our mission there, and they sent us back to Antioch. Paul still had some pretty sharp edges and could wear out a welcome pretty quickly.

This happened at Antioch again in only a few months. With the approval of the Holy Spirit, the Christians at Antioch soon decided that Paul and I should be set apart for a long missionary journey, which they were more than happy to fund. Again, I would never question the motives of my friends at Antioch, but their laying on of hands for us felt every bit like a push!¹⁶

My biggest job of peacekeeping had to do with Paul and Peter. They loved the same God, and they loved each other, but they fought like brothers. If Paul saw something one way, Peter saw it another. And they had no problem fighting it out. Finally, they figured out that Paul should be concerned solely with the Gentiles, and Peter with the Jews. After that, things were smoother.

One surprising thing was that neither Peter nor Paul was worried about being the top apostle. They both knew that Christ was so far at the top that they were both his slaves. Even so, at the end of his life, Peter couldn't help but give Paul a little love tap. Peter wrote, "Paul's letters contain some things that are hard to understand."¹⁷ What he meant was, "Paul, I love you, but you are making it too hard for the rest of us. Festus was right, your great learning is driving you crazy... and me!"¹⁸

¹⁶ Acts 13:3

¹⁷ 2 Peter 3:16

¹⁸ Acts 26:24

Peter and Paul didn't contend for importance, but I should mention myself in that regard. You might not have noticed, but from the very first, I was held in higher regard by the believers than Paul. Sometimes I was called an apostle. In fact, Paul was considered to be my apprentice by most people, and that relationship lasted many years. Even Dr. Luke acknowledged that fact by mentioning my name first whenever Paul and I were together. That is, until we were in the middle of the first missionary journey at Psidian Antioch. Then everything changed. It became clear that Paul had taken leadership, and I was now the supporting cast. It was a bittersweet moment for the Son of Encouragement... but I get to be named a Child of God...see, change the way you think.