



People of the Book

— Volume 4 —

Hosea Hannah
Jeremiah Barnabas

Contents

Chapter One

HOSEA: MINOR PROPHET; MAJOR MESSAGE.....	2
---	---

Chapter Two

HANNAH: COPING WITH THE PAIN OF CHILDLESSNESS.....	8
---	---

Chapter Three

JEREMIAH: PROPHET OF HOPE.....	14
--------------------------------	----

Chapter Four

BARNABAS: MISTER ENCOURAGEMENT....	20
------------------------------------	----

© 2002 Plain Truth Ministries
All rights reserved
Printed in U.S.A.

Plain Truth Ministries
Pasadena, California 91129
1-800-309-4466
www.ptm.org

Unless noted otherwise, scriptures are quoted
from the *Holy Bible, New International Version*.
Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984 International
Bible Society. Used by permission of
Zondervan Bible Publishers.

Introduction

People of the Book is back, by popular demand! We are pleased to present *Volume 4*, with fresh and unique perspectives of the lives of Hosea, Hannah, Jeremiah and Barnabas.

The biblical characters we highlight in this popular series are not necessarily the best known or most loved personalities, but our readers tell us that our approach to these personalities is meaningful and relevant.

As always, we extend our appreciation to our partners and donors who help us provide this and many other resources free of charge.

May the Bible come to life for you in new and exciting ways as you read these pages!



Greg Albrecht
Executive Director, Plain Truth Ministries



Hosea: Minor Prophet; Major Message

Let me tell you a love story that dates back to eight centuries before Jesus. It's the story of Hosea, a type of Christ, who exemplified God's love within the marriage covenant. I shall relate the story to short-lived marriages of today and to God's undying love for his people. To set the stage, I shall read between the lines a bit...but it may very well have happened this way.

A Mismatch Made in Heaven

Hosea was a "minor prophet" with a major message to Israel, specifically, to the northern tribes (typified by Ephraim). Hosea was obedient to God and a very eligible bachelor. One day, God spoke to him, as it were: *Hosea, my man, it's time for you to marry and start a family. I've arranged for you to meet Gomer tonight on your way back from the temple. She will be wearing red and waiting by the roadside.*

Hosea's heart skipped a beat at the prospect of marriage: *This is the moment I've been dreaming of. Now I'll have a woman to love and a household of my own. Wow, of all the women in Israel, God has picked one just for me! She must be beautiful, a woman of faith who will make a wonderful life partner. Who else would be good enough for God to give me?*

God awakened Hosea from such dreamy thoughts: *What would it matter if she were a woman of God? You'd love her only because of what she can do. That won't do. I will give you my love for her because she will be an adulterous woman who will break your heart many times*

over. *Yet you will still love her as I have loved faithless Israel.* Now Hosea's heart pounded even more anxiously on his way home that evening. *Who is this shady lady who will soon be my bride?*

Gomer saw Hosea coming toward her. She knew him to be the prophet of God, but couldn't understand why such a high-ranking man would approach such a poor servant girl. They had nothing in common, not even religion. Gomer broke the awkward silence as the two locked eyes. She invited him inside her humble abode to offer him rest and to pleasure him.

Hosea squared his shoulders and knelt before her. He spoke, *No that's not what I want. You may not believe this, and I don't quite understand this either, but...I love you and want your hand in marriage.* Now it was Gomer's turn to search an anxious heart racing away. Perhaps this was a cruel hoax.

Yet Hosea repeated his pledge and meant what he said. This would be her chance to start over. But she told him more of who she was—all the sordid details. As their conversation continued well into the night, it was apparent Hosea really did love her. They went forward with the marriage.

Sounds like a dreamy love story: Hosea redeems Gomer from a life of poverty and commercial sex, and they live happily ever after. Trouble is, that's not quite how it happened. For the rest of the story, read the first three chapters of the Old Testament book bearing Hosea's name.

Stranger Things Have Happened!

Some say this mismatch of a marriage was only a story told by Hosea to illustrate a point. The righteous God of Israel would never have asked a saintly man to marry a sex worker, especially not a cultic mistress who prostituted herself in the service of foreign gods. Such an odd marriage is also unlikely to have occurred, they say, given the names of the children. Hosea and Gomer had three children whose very names were prophetic or allegorical, embodying God's own pain at Israel's

betrayal. Only the firstborn, named *Jezreel* (meaning "God scatters"), appears born to the union of Gomer and Hosea (Hosea 1:4). That name recalls the scene of Gideon's great victory and Jehu's conquest of evil king Ahab—both positive elements.

But the two other children in this dysfunctional family were likely born out of wedlock, that is, children of Gomer's adultery: *Lo-Ruhamah*, "for God will no longer have mercy on the house of Israel," and *Lo-Ammi*, "for you are not my people" (Hosea 1:6,9). Such names would have been scandalous in their day. What kind of loving parent has a boy or girl only to abandon or despise that child? While the story of Hosea (whose name means "deliverance" or "the Lord has saved") graphically portrays how God was working and would work with Israel, we have good reason for believing the marriage occurred exactly as the Bible states.

Stranger symbolic actions were performed by other prophets: Isaiah once stripped naked for three years (Isaiah 20:1-6), and Ezekiel once staged a 430-day sit-in, performing outrageous street theater using human excrement and cow manure (Ezekiel 4:1-17). A culture where such dramatic actions were "normal" for prophets might not be as shocked as we would be if our preachers did the same.

Hosea not only married Gomer, he stayed by her side through betrayal and brokenness, putting his life on the line, allowing his heart to be broken repeatedly, even putting his money where his mouth was. Why Gomer left such a loving husband in the first place the text does not say. We cannot imagine what compulsion drove her from one relationship to another, bringing their marriage to the breaking point.

We might think she wanted out of the smothering demands typically imposed on a Hebrew wife. Pursuing sexual or economic freedom for herself, the compulsive Gomer played the harlot once again. Years later, having lost any vestige of "freedom" she ever had, she was brought into the city market to be auctioned off as a slave. There she encountered a much-older

Hosea, who could hardly have recognized her, except perhaps when their eyes met. Hosea redeemed his estranged wife with “fifteen shekels” and gifts in kind (Hosea 3:2)—considered an overpayment for a slave in those days.

What Hosea did in word and deed to redeem Gomer made for an effective sermon-and-drama-in-real-life. But this story is not really about Hosea’s undying love, but about the unlimited length and breadth and depth of God’s redeeming love.

Dramatic Picture of God’s Redeeming Love

Such unconditional love has long been associated with Christianity rather than with Judaism, but there IS grace in the Hebrew Testament, especially here in Hosea, which portrays flawed humans coming to terms with the incomprehensible grace of God.

As Hosea joined himself in marriage to a promiscuous Gomer, he shared God’s experience of being joined to his “wife” Israel who had prostituted herself to other gods. Hosea portrays an intimate God, whose passionate pursuit of his beloved people made him different than all the pantheistic Greek and Asian gods. This God of Israel is a true lover, one who upholds the marriage covenant.

Just as Hosea purchased his errant wife back, so also God would purchase Israel back (Hosea 3:1-5). The purchase price was steep for Hosea and would be costly for God. True forgiveness and reconciliation is never cheap or easy. Both Hosea’s wife Gomer and God’s “wife” Israel had to live with the consequences of their adultery. Israel would fall prey to another nation (Hosea 9:11-17; 10:14-15), stripped of success, wealth and military might (Hosea 2:2-13; 8:14). However, God would restore Israel’s fortunes if and when she repented (Hosea 2:14-23; 11:1-11; 14:1-9). Sadly, Israel did not repent in Hosea’s day and was soon overrun by Assyrians and taken into captivity (722 B.C.).

Hosea was told, “Go, show your love to your wife again, though she is loved by another and

is an adulteress” (Hosea 3:1). Try as I might, it’s hard to imagine his anguish over Gomer repeatedly rejecting his love for her. I can empathize with Hosea’s need to shield himself against the gossip, shame and humiliation about his wife’s adultery. However, I cannot get inside Hosea’s heart to know how he (or any man) could allow their heart to be broken again and again by a woman who transgresses—from sexual promiscuity to cultic prostitution to the violent debauchery of the slave market.

If I were Hosea, “compassion fatigue” would have set in and anger taken over. My righteous indignation would yield to moral outrage—to justifiable grounds for divorce. Every hair on my neck would stand up in rebellion as I shout back: *Why open myself up for more hurt and humiliation? Why forgive her? She’s the kind we used to stone!* But just as God loved his people and chose to be reconciled to them despite their sin, so Hosea must go and be reconciled to Gomer, even though she doesn’t deserve reconciliation.

Modern-day Reenactment

You probably have not had to endure the pain of a spouse with a psychological profile or a character disorder as extreme as Gomer. Nonetheless, consider the pain and frustration that we all have experienced with friends and family members who have wronged us in ways that seem irreparable. Consider, too, the people you have cut off merely because of what they have said or done to you that was rude. God is saying, “Go and love again!”

Furthermore, consider your own relationship with God by identifying with Gomer. None of us naturally desires or deserves God. We are sinners bent toward willful independence and disobedience. We find it humanly impossible to make this Hosea-like God to be the Savior-Redeemer and sovereign Lord of our lives, yet God is always suffering for us, buying us back and reconciling us to himself.

—Originally published November 2000

Hannah: Coping With the Pain of Childlessness

No amount of planning, trying or trickery seemed to work for Hannah and her husband Elkanah. Try as she might, Hannah of ancient Israel could not conceive “because the Lord had closed her womb” (1 Samuel 1:6).

Today, with so many birth control and lifestyle options available, wannabe dads and moms struggle with the life-altering decision to have a child (or additional children). Newlyweds often wait until after their careers are established and their checkbooks are balanced before having a child. Second-time around families, as well as those marrying some time after their prime child-bearing years, agonize long and hard, postponing the day of new beginnings. Other would-be dads and moms can’t wait to get started. If you want children, but nothing seems to work—this character study in infertility and perseverance is for you. If you are struggling with the challenges of infertility or know someone who is, read on.

Infertility—All Too Common

Nearly one in six couples are unable to conceive or carry a pregnancy to term—a condition commonly called infertility. The odds of never giving birth to a live child approach 1 in 3 if the couple delays conception until their 30s. Childless couples must face the painful prospect of never having children—no child to bear the family likeness or legacy to the world.



ILLUSTRATION BY JODY EASTMAN

Strong social pressures complicate the lives of childless couples and make for many comic-tragic moments. As a woman's biological clock ticks away, others are there to remind her—"What are you waiting for?" Inadvertently, "Fertile Myrtle" and "Stanley Stud," with their five children all under ten years old, can make the infertile couple feel awkward and envious. Well-meaning family and friends are watching, hoping and nosing around.

Mourning the loss of something we never had is a very complex loss—one not treated at the hospital, covered by insurance nor appreciated by couples blessed with children on their first try. Infertile couples must learn to grieve for the child they never had.

Letting go of this dream is crucial to a healthy resolution of infertility. Although society has become more accepting of the grief associated with miscarriage, still birth or infant death, the experience of infertile couples is still a silent grief, largely misunderstood.

Wannabe Dads Grieve With Their Spouses

If you want to be a father but can't, you will cope and grieve in a different way than your wife. Often, the would-be father's loss is less physiologically or emotionally acute than the grieving mother's, who has already bonded with her pre-born child. While I did not experience the loss of our miscarried babies the same way as my wife did, my own loss was nonetheless real and painful. Infertility and miscarriage are very unsettling and anger-producing for many reasons:

- Would-be dads and moms struggle with their sexuality and identity. Church and society have defined marriage roles largely by one's ability to father ("sire") or mother ("give birth to").
- Would-be parents fear loss of control. Infertility treatment exposes their sex lives to medical experts and high-risk, low-result procedures.
- Would-be dads and moms suffer embarrassment from nosy questions and "helpful"

advice, as well as providing sexual history details and sperm specimens to doctors.

- Would-be dads and moms hate pressure and insensitivity from would-be grandparents, family members and friends. A friend's baby brings joy and hope to the infertile couple, mingled with pain. Mother's Day can be unbearable.

- Would-be moms and dads cry "unfair" when they see "undeserving" parents—especially neglectful and abusive parents, welfare moms or sexually active teens—having all the babies they (don't) want.

- Would-be dads and moms can become trapped in the blame game, which pits husband against wife in the hunt for who's at fault.

- Would-be dads and moms succumb to guilt and shame, as they look to their own hearts and to God for answers. "What's wrong? Is God punishing us for some reason, perhaps for immoral behavior sometime earlier?"

A Double Bind

Infertility was a tragic bind for women in every ancient patriarchal culture, but particularly in Israel's, where motherhood was a woman's highest calling. Conversely, a "barren womb" was considered a punishment or a curse. In ancient Israel, infertility was considered so shameful it was grounds for divorce. A man would abandon an infertile woman and marry another who could bear him a child, preferably a son.

Scripture describes the desperation of the barren wife—Sarah, Rachel and Hannah, among others. The infertile Hannah even lost her reason for living (1 Samuel 1:3-8). Reflecting on such biblical accounts, one wonders if our biblical forefathers realized infertility may have been the husband's problem. To keep their husbands happy, some desperate wives provided a surrogate mother to bear "their" child—as Sarah did for Abraham (Genesis 16:1-4) and Rachel did for Jacob (30:1-6).

Like other patriarchs concerned about their male legacy, Hannah's husband Elkanah also had a second wife—Peninnah, who bore him sever-

al children (1 Samuel 1:1-2). But this did not deter Hannah's resolve to have a child of her own, not just for her husband's sake, but for the Lord's sake. Hannah believed, if God were to provide, the fruit of her womb would not be hers but God's: "O Lord Almighty, if you will only look upon your servant's misery and remember me, and not forget your servant but give her a son, then I will give him to the Lord for all the days of his life, and no razor will ever be used on his head" (1 Samuel 1:11).

Hannah's Trouble Is Instructive

How has your own waiting period and eventual passage to parenting affected your faith? Perhaps you, or someone in your circle of influence has failed, over a long period of time, to become pregnant. Maybe a friend has repeatedly suffered failed pregnancies or false hopes of adoption. All such "failures" could benefit from the example of Hannah.

Would-be fathers and mothers can cope with the pain of childlessness by drawing upon Hannah's exemplary faith in dealing with those who provoke us. Whereas Elkanah's second wife Peninnah bore him several children and Hannah was childless year after sorrowful year, Peninnah compounded Hannah's misery by "provoking" her, causing some "bitterness of soul," depression and loss of appetite (1 Samuel 1:4-8). However, Hannah, vulnerable as she was, did not give up the faith, but instead poured out her heart to God, whom she acknowledged to be ultimately responsible for her fate.

Imitating Hannah when the going gets really tough, we too should pour out our hearts to the Lord. Based on Hannah's example, we should be absolutely honest with God and talk with him as with our earthly friends. Tell the Lord whatever you're feeling, even if—no, especially when—you feel afraid, angry, confused, hurt or depressed. When you read through the Psalms, you'll find that David often poured out his feelings to the Lord.

Consider all the years that Hannah must have wrestled with unanswered prayer. A couple's childlessness and hope for an heir elicits faith in the God of promise. Despite prolonged childlessness, old age and a barren womb, Hannah believed God to keep his end of a bargain.

Prepare To Persevere With God

Hannah gives us hope that God will do as much for us who believe, whatever our troubled situation may be. That does not mean each couple will receive their longed-for, prayed-for child. Nor does it mean that wannabe parents and Hannah-like believers will necessarily have their faith rewarded by having children one way or the other.

The fruitful, happy ending to Elkanah's and Hannah's story is, of course, the boy Samuel. But that is not the norm for childless couples. Nor is giving birth to a child after years of futility the only happy ending for a man or woman of faith. God sometimes chooses for a particular couple not to have children. Jesus calls others to renounce marriage for a higher calling (Matthew 19:12; 1 Corinthians 7:7-8).

In either event, God does answer every prayer, but not necessarily in the way or by the time-table you and I operate on. The eternal God knows the end from the beginning and knows what is best for us. And so, for our own good, our heavenly Father will not grant our every wish, any more than a responsible earthly father would.

Situations of singleness or childlessness—which are often not our choice—can be godly callings when accepted for their inherent opportunities. God can use us in ways that would not be possible if we were encumbered with family responsibilities. As a mentor, you can take others' children under your wing—blessing them with the love of God and praying for them. With Hannah-like faith, we can also make a difference in building up the family of God—even if God does not grant us children of our own.

—Originally published May 2001



ILLUSTRATION BY JODY EASTMAN

Jeremiah: Prophet of Hope

When Plato (c. 428-348 B.C.) said, “The unexamined life is not worth living,” he might have had Jeremiah in mind. Examining Jeremiah’s life, we see someone who fulfilled all that God meant him to be. As we seek to clarify and become all that we were born to be, we can take heart from this prophet of hope who heard and obeyed God’s call from the outset.

Born into a priestly family in Anathoth (three miles NE of Jerusalem), Jeremiah’s whole life was wrapped up solely in God, his Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer (Jeremiah 1:1-19). Yet this timely-born prophet did not choose God, as in some *I Found It!* campaign or special commissioning service. Rather, the sovereign God ordained Jeremiah from the beginning: “Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, before you were born I set you apart; I appointed you as a prophet to the nations” (Jeremiah 1:5).

Jeremiah lived life to its fullest, but he also lived selflessly and faithfully. With singular focus and consistent moral excellence, Jeremiah towered above his contemporaries in ancient (7th century B.C.) Judah. He would stand out among today’s North Americans, too, as he eschewed all creature comforts (no wife, no kids, no drink, no merry-making) to fulfill his life’s purpose. Why? Because God was bringing imminent disaster on Jerusalem (Jeremiah 16:1-17:4).

However, this life would come with an even higher price. Jeremiah pursued righteousness in an immoral and idolatrous society with zeal (Jeremiah 2:1-10:15). In the face of torture,

imprisonment, captivity and death threats from fellow Jews, he lived courageously and purposefully (Jeremiah 11:18-23; 26:8-16; 37, 38, 43). With God's word burning like fire in his bones (Jeremiah 20:9), Jeremiah takes on tougher and tougher assignments. Jeremiah exposed bank fraud, moral corruption, sex scandals, neglect of the urban poor, child abuse, religious idolatry, perjury and other high crimes and misdemeanors by those living in the capital city. With predictable contempt and melodramatic visual aids, he prosecuted the case against government leaders who led the people astray.

By most social and performance standards, Jeremiah was a miserable failure. He may have been God's appointed prophet to Judah and the nations outside Israel, but when Jeremiah spoke, no one listened. His career was a divine appointment, spanning that of five kings—some good, some evil—across forty years, 627-586 B.C. But when he called kings and their citizens to action, no one moved in his direction, except to defy or plot against him.

He did not win friends and influence people. Rather, he was rejected by neighbors (Jeremiah 11:19-21), by family (Jeremiah 12:6), by his colleagues of priests and (false) prophets (Jeremiah 20:1-2), and by fellow citizens and kings alike (Jeremiah 20:10; 26:8; 36:23).

Jeremiah Also Had Issues With God

As a 12 or 13-year-old youth, he quite naturally questioned God's call at first: "I do not know how to speak; I am only a child" (Jeremiah 1:6). Later, even with God speaking through him mightily, Jeremiah was persecuted and ridiculed mercilessly. He was tempted to quit, but took his complaints to God, who reassured Jeremiah and his compatriots with promises of peace, prosperity and justice.

Talking *to* God is always better than talking *about* God, especially when bad times hit. Jeremiah is renown as a weeping, praying prophet. Seven passages in Jeremiah (8:18-9:3;

11:18-23; 15:10-12; 15:15-21; 17:14-18; 18:18-23; 20:7-18), plus all five chapters of Lamentations, are considered prayers of confession or complaint.

Here, we get intimate glimpses into his heart, revealing the fire for God that burns within, all the while fires rage throughout the city he loved. Jeremiah's anguish of soul—in which he sometimes called for redress against personal enemies—has come to be called a *jeremiad*.

In sharing his fear, hurt, anger and loneliness, Jeremiah sets before us an example of genuine prayer. Note, as well, that Jeremiah's conversations with God are two-way and demand persistence. Jeremiah listens expectantly for God to respond. God feels his pain but does not indulge his self-pity. Jeremiah's walk matched his talk with God and man. Reading God's creative word each day, Jeremiah experienced and conveyed God's mercies as steadfast and tender, as creative and ever-new as the dawn's early light (Lamentations 3:22-23).

Not only did Jeremiah *read* God's word—believed to be Deuteronomy, rediscovered by King Josiah, contemporary of Jeremiah (Jeremiah 1:2)—he also *wrote* God's word. Just as Deuteronomy (meaning second law) partially re-states the message of Moses to a people who had drifted from God's covenant, so also Jeremiah reiterates the message of Deuteronomy to a later generation who had abandoned the covenant. Both books are about survival and renewal—getting back home safely, not only to the Promised Land, but to God himself.

Turning the Worldview Upside Down

Jeremiah did two more things by faith that set him apart and set us an example: 1) He sent a letter to the exiles urging them to settle in enemy territory (Jeremiah 29). 2) He bought a small field at Anathoth in that same territory (Jeremiah 32).

First, imagine the shock-value his letter must have had. It's as if God was saying through Jeremiah: *You are not victims, you are refugees. I've sent you here on a mission. Unpack your*

suitcases, folks. Invest in the host community, get yourself a house, raise your kids there, put down roots. Increase there. Therein lies another bombshell—victims don't put down roots. Almost all forced refugees (migrants repatriated for economic, political or whatever reason) preserve their mobility so they can return home at the first safe opportunity. To build houses there, to plant gardens, take wives, have families there (Jeremiah 29:6)—is incomprehensible. Yet refugees can be migrant missionaries—whether from Jerusalem in that day, or more recently from Bosnia, Kenya or Russia. God has always used refugees to spread his kingdom.

Jeremiah tells these exiles to forget home and settle down—in Babylon, of all places. Worse yet, Babylon was destroying their life back home in Jerusalem. Yet these Jews were told not only to live in Babylon, but also to pray for its welfare. Can you imagine anything so contrary to human emotions than to work for the success and benefit of your captors? This turns the Judeo-Christian worldview upside down.

The radical Jeremiah is so counter-intuitive, but full of faith, in a second respect: While in prison he spends seventeen shekels to buy a field held by his captors, which land he would never occupy (Jeremiah 32:1-15). We might think, *How dumb can you get?* Jeremiah has his reasons for buying that field in his hometown of Anathoth. Convinced that all the troubles swirling around him were not the final reality, he trusted that God would keep his word that all Israel would be restored to Jerusalem and the Promised Land (Jeremiah 32:36-44).

The Exile Is the Crucible of Faith

Thus Jeremiah puts legs to his prayers and money where his mouth is. In so doing, he sets an example to all people of faith, but especially those in exile. Any kind of exile—that is, being where we don't want to be, living with people we don't want to be with—forces us to make a life-changing decision of faith: Will we

make the best of it, plant roots and build relationships with those around us? Or complain about our victim status and try to escape our difficult or unjust circumstances?

For the most part, people of the Exile accepted the invitation and promise conveyed in Jeremiah's letter. And so the period of the Exile became Israel's most creative in history. The Jews did not lose their identity, but found it. The Israelites may have lost everything they once deemed important. But they found God, as they rediscovered the Law and the Prophets, and pulled together the Psalter.

With the Temple destroyed and the priesthood scattered, the practice of lay-led worship services in tent-like synagogues also came together (and reached out!) at this time. While the dislocating experience of the Exile played havoc with their familiar ways and places of worship, these dispersed Israelites came to see God as an ever-present help in time of need. The God of the Exile was with them wherever they were.

In these and many other respects, the Exile—so very pivotal to Jeremiah and the New Testament writers who quote him so extensively—is not the death knell of Israel's faith. On the contrary, the Exile of Jeremiah's prophecy is really the crucible of Jewish (and Christian) faith. Hence, this failure in the eyes of the world is, in God's eyes, an unmitigated success.

In 40 years of faithful ministry, Jeremiah lived out the meaning of his name: the Lord exalts (or hurls). As a representative of God hurled into the community, Jeremiah penetrated the depths of idolatrous sin and tore down the defenses of prideful kingdoms. Jerusalem's destruction by fire in 597-586 B.C. and the Babylonian captivity for 70 years hence (Jeremiah 39:1-10) came to pass just as he prophesied (Jeremiah 4:4-31; 11:9-17; 15:13-14; 17:27; 21:10-14; 25:8-14; 29:10-23). Jeremiah let us know what God is like, what God wants, where God is working and what consequences will befall those who ignore the things of God.

—Originally published July 2001



Barnabas: Mister Encouragement

The call to mentoring relationships is foundational to Christianity. To mentor a brother or sister in Christ means pursuing a vital relationship with a fellow believer, seeing the grace of God at work in their life, understanding their need for encouragement and accountability, and together responding in faith to bring out one's best.

In the first-century Barnabas, I see a mentor who pursued a vital relationship with the apostle Paul and the disciple John Mark—two prospects whom others had rejected. The “Barnabas-Paul” and “Barnabas-John Mark” relationships represent a pattern of biblical mentoring that twenty-first century believers can pattern their lives after.

You might well follow the pattern of S-U-C-C-E-S-S that characterizes Barnabas' life and ministry. As we shall see, SUCCESS in mentoring may be spelled in simple terms: Sacrificial giving, Undergirding support, Covenanting with another, Coaching the successor, Encouraging words, Sustaining a failure—all pumped by a Servant heart.

Sacrificial Giving

We are introduced to Barnabas by a different name—Joseph of Cyprus. This was no ordinary Joe. He was raised a Levite, which meant dutiful service for 25 years (from age 25-50) assisting with worship rituals and temple maintenance.

But Levites were not required to live all their lives dedicated to the sanctuary—just certain months of the year. Much as with military reservists today, the Levite's tour of duty came

up once a year. So when he wasn't pulling "reserve guard" duty, Joseph lived in his own city as a self-employed landowner in Cyprus. Cyprus is the island off the coast of Syria and Greece, famous for its wines, wheat, honey, oils and figs. Anyone owning a piece of Cyprus enjoyed great wealth. When this rich Joe became a Christian, he was caught up in the post-Pentecost fervor and thoroughly converted—right down to his pocketbook and possessions. To care for the poor and encourage the early church, he generously deeded over a significant piece of real estate (Acts 4:37).

This gift of land received special mention, not for its size, but for Barnabas' generosity. Sacrifice is the first of seven principles of S-U-C-C-E-S-S Barnabas lived by.

Undergirding Support

Barnabas' gift of real estate also represented the integrity of a man who gave his all, holding nothing back. Barnabas held nothing back—in finances and in truth-telling—because he wanted to undergird, not undermine, the ministry of others. Undergirding support is the second principle of S-U-C-C-E-S-S that Barnabas lived by.

To illustrate this point by way of contrast, the story of giving to the early church continues (see Acts 4:34-5:11). Like Barnabas, Ananias and Sapphira also sold a piece of property for the sake of the early church.

However, they lied about what they had done—claiming to have given all, but secretly holding back some proceeds—presumably to make themselves look better. But their lie effectively undercut the apostles' ministry. In the foundation of a new ministry, this undercutting lie had to be dealt with severely, or the apostle's authority would have been undermined further. That's why Ananias and Sapphira were judged by God and dropped dead on the spot.

Their fatal mistake, contrasted by the sacrificial and undergirding ministry of Barnabas, begs a question of all believers and promise-

makers: You can't fool God. What are you withholding from him?

Covenanting With Another

Giving the land was only the first of a long track record of deeds done that earned him the nickname "Barnabas," meaning "Son of Encouragement" (Acts 4:36). But nothing Barnabas did shines brighter or encourages more than his act of taking Paul into his heart and under his wing.

Other church leaders feared a trap and would not trust this man—with good reason. He still had the blood of martyrs on his hands! Paul (formerly known as Saul) had been an agent of the religious establishment who terrorized the early church with his search-and-destroy missions (Acts 8:1-3; 9:21,26).

Whereas other church leaders feared Paul, Barnabas broke ranks and bonded with the former persecutor and murderer of Christians. "But Barnabas took him and brought him to the apostles. He told them how Saul on his journey had seen the Lord and that the Lord had spoken to him, and how in Damascus he had preached fearlessly in the name of Jesus" (Acts 9:27). Barnabas saw this friendless new convert had potential as a preacher of the gospel and leader in the church.

The bond of partnership they forged is like a covenant. Covenanting with others is the third principle of S-U-C-C-E-S-S that Barnabas lived by. To illustrate, recall the covenant Jonathan made with David (1 Samuel 18:1-5). It was likewise an expression of loyalty and trust, but not without risk and testing.

Their bond of friendship proved strong enough to assure that David would succeed in all that God gave him to do. Their covenant relationship endured even when it became apparent that David would replace Jonathan as the successor to his father King Saul's throne.

Likewise, Barnabas' covenant with Paul conferred a blessing that would enable the apostle to succeed in all that God gave him to do. Their covenant relationship endured even though Paul

would eventually replace Barnabas as a pillar and pioneer of the early church.

Coaching the Successor

The success of those who were helped by Barnabas was also due to his ability to see the “grace of God” at work in others. In keeping with ear-



The success of those who were helped by Barnabas was also due to his ability to see the “grace of God” at work in others.

ly church practice, the elders at Jerusalem sent Barnabas to Antioch to confirm the apparent revival breaking out among the Gentiles there.

“When he arrived and saw the evidence of the grace of God, he was glad and encouraged them all to remain true to the Lord with all their hearts. He was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and faith, and a great number of people were brought to the Lord” (Acts 11:23-24). Being further down the road on his spiritual journey, Barnabas could confirm or coach a younger believer. Coaching others is the fourth principle of S-U-C-C-E-S-S that Barnabas lived by.

Encouraging Words

It seems Coach Barnabas inserted Paul into the mission field and subbed him into the church’s leadership at the right time (Acts 11:25-26). When an international team of leaders gathered for prayer, fasting and decision-making at Antioch, Barnabas went with Saul-turned-Paul in their lineup for a new world missions thrust (Acts 13:1-3).

Barnabas became Paul’s prayer partner for life, his traveling companion on many missionary journeys, a key advocate against detractors and a brother through thick and thin (Acts 13:3, 15:35). Soon Paul eclipsed Barnabas in importance and honor. No matter. Barnabas could have been envious of Paul, but he was encouraging.

Encouraging words is the fifth principle of S-U-C-C-E-S-S that Barnabas lived by. His very name means “Son of Encouragement” (Acts 4:36). His ability to see the grace of God at work in others and to “encourage” faithfulness to God’s call was laudable (Acts 11:23).

Barnabas encouraged others not only by his words, but by his example, by the Holy Spirit and by faith. In time, Paul would follow Barnabas’ example by entrusting the gospel to “reliable men” who would then be coached to “teach others” (2 Timothy 2:2).

Sustaining a Failure

Not only did Coach Barnabas take a great risk in sustaining Paul’s missionary endeavors and pioneer projects when they came under attack, he did the same risky advocacy work for young John Mark, who had “deserted” Paul’s missionary team after a very short stint (Acts 12:25; 13:13; 15:38).

John Mark was rejected for another assignment by Paul for being AWOL. At stake was the doctrine and discipline of the church. Barnabas took John Mark with him back to Cyprus (Barnabas’ home state) for some necessary R & R (15:39). There Barnabas no doubt sustained him with reassurances of salvation, forgiveness and nurturing from God’s Word. Restored to min-

istry by Barnabas, John Mark later proved “helpful” to Paul as one of his associates (2 Timothy 4:11) John Mark went on to become an associate of Peter’s (1 Peter 5:13) and author of the second Gospel.

John Mark’s full restoration to ministry is a tribute to Barnabas’ ability to sustain and forgive failure. Evidently, Barnabas could discern future success where others could only see past failure. Sustaining a failure is the sixth principle of S-U-C-C-E-S-S exemplified by Barnabas.

Servant Heart

Neither Saul of Tarsus nor John Mark would have accomplished what they did without Barnabas serving their best interest. The six principles described above may be simply restated in a seventh that summarizes, even energizes, the whole: a Servant heart is what defines his ministry as a S-U-C-C-E-S-S.

We stand in need of Barnabas-like encouragement to fulfill our calling as parents, coaches, business and church leaders. May God cultivate in us the heart to go out of our way to bring out the best in our subordinates and the grace to step aside when the time comes.

Finding and being a Barnabas—a good person full of the Holy Spirit and faith—is the key to helping you and others succeed in life. The call to cultivate a servant heart in a mentoring relationship applies to many work situations, as well as relationships within the church.

In our parenting of teenagers, we ease their transition to adulthood with Barnabas-like grace and second chances. In a growing business or church, it takes Barnabas-like insight and foresight to groom future leaders from a pool of young fanatics or first-round failures.

Will you be a Barnabas for someone? Surely the grace of God extended to you is not meant for you alone, but to strengthen you as you become a source of encouragement to others, as was Barnabas, the original “Son of Encouragement.”

—Originally published July 2000