

Wings

*“Those who wait on the Lord shall renew their strength;
they shall mount up with wings like eagles.”
Isaiah 40:31*



December 1, 2013

Even Barnabas

Barnabas was a good man — but not perfect. His stumble in Antioch teaches us some timely lessons about ourselves and the limits of respect for our leaders.

“And the rest of the Jews also played the hypocrite with him, so that even Barnabas was carried away with their hypocrisy” (Gal. 2:13).

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In this context Paul is recounting an incident from several years earlier in Antioch of Syria, in which Peter, his fellow apostle, refused to eat with his Gentile brethren under pressure from a Jewish faction. It was a bitter disappointment to Paul, who had worked so hard to realize God’s vision of Jews and Gentiles united in a single body.

Peter’s failure usually gets the attention in this story, but I’m drawn to Paul’s description of a second person who also stumbled: Barnabas. Peter was an impetuous character with a history of embarrassing himself, so we’re not too surprised at his behavior. But Barnabas was different. He was a consistent champion of the underdog who had no problem standing up against prejudice when it showed its ugly face. Paul himself had personally benefited from Barnabas’ steady intervention at the beginning of his career (Ac. 9:26-28).

Yet on this occasion in Antioch, “even Barnabas” was swept away in the fervor of Jewish purity. It was a terrible mistake that reversed all the hard work the apostles had done in previous years. Paul alone had to confront his co-workers with the error of their ways and try to undo the damage that had been done.

The story of Barnabas’ failure holds two important lessons for us today.

First, it is yet another reminder that even the best of us is susceptible to temptation and sin. Given just the right circumstances, Satan can find our weak spots and exploit them, leading us into saying or doing things that we would normally avoid like the plague. After this whole incident blew over, I’m sure Barnabas was mortified over what he had done. How could he have been so foolish? Why didn’t he see the gross hypocrisy of his actions even as he was committing them? Whatever the socio-psychological reasons behind the surrender of his convictions, Barnabas stands as a warning to the rest of us never to think “it could never happen to me.” Oh, yes, it can! And it is the very

failure to recognize how easily this can happen that sets us up for a fall.

Second, the fact that two of Christianity’s greatest champions — including “even Barnabas” — committed this error and had to be rebuked tells us that no man deserves our unqualified loyalty. The respect and honor we show our spiritual leaders should always be tempered with an understanding that they have feet of clay, and are subject to the same temptations and biases as the rest of us. Occasionally, those weaknesses may be displayed in ways that ought to disappoint us — if we’re impartial enough to recognize it. Unfortunately, we are often so blinded by our heroes’ accomplishments that we fail to see their shortcomings for what they are. No man should ever hold such a firm grip on our affections that we cannot see his mistakes.

If a good man like Barnabas can stumble so badly, we should all arm ourselves with a generous dose of humility lest we stumble, too. And remember that Jesus Christ is the only role model who deserves our total loyalty.

– David King