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"Even Barnabas"

by T. Austin-Sparks

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"...even Barnabas was carried away with their dissimulation." (Galatians 2:13.)

What a pity that such painful and unhappy incidents should have been placed on record for all time! What a still greater pity that they should ever have happened at all, and that right at the heart of the Apostolic circle in those most vital and crucial of all days! The Holy Spirit, as Custodian of the Divine records, must have had some very justifying reason for causing or allowing such things to be in the Bible. And there are - sad to say - not a few of such things.

When Paul wrote this in his letter there must have been a distinct change in his tone at these words - "even Barnabas".

This is, perhaps, the most vehement of all his letters. He is truly on the war-path in white-hot jealousy for the truth and purity of the Gospel, and he says some very strong things.

But at this point we can discern the mingled tones of surprise, grief, disappointment. "Even Barnabas" - Barnabas: the one who had befriended him when, being under suspicion, he stood alone, the other Apostles fearing him and "not believing that he was a disciple"! The one who had sought him out at Tarsus as the man needed for the hour! The one who had been committed with him to the work and had laboured and travelled far with him! The one who had seen and shared and gloried in his ministry to the Gentiles! Barnabas, the "good man" (Acts 11:24)! Can it be true?

When certain from James came to Antioch Peter withdrew and others also. Paul does not emit surprise over Peter, only condemnation (Gal. 2:11). But for race-prejudice and discrimination to approach in his dear friend Barnabas, that shocks him, and he says in astonishment, "Even

Barnabas"! Was this the betrayal of something in Barnabas, which, although for some time it was covered over and they worked on together for a while, yet eventually came out again in another connection and resulted in their permanent separation in the work?

What are we to make of it? Can we, without wrongly judging Barnabas, put our finger on that flaw, that something which so painfully spoiled a relationship? What is it that we are intended to learn from this being put into the glorious story of the first years? What did Paul call it? - dissimulation. What is dissimulation? It is hypocrisy, play-acting; literally it means 'from behind a mask': pretence, unreality, falsehood.

There is a Scripture that touches this very directly - "the fear of man bringeth a snare" (Prov. 29:25). Perhaps in other ways Barnabas was not afraid of men, but the weakness - the fatal weakness - that shows itself here is allowing his natural temperament to govern him when most serious issues were in the balances. Barnabas was evidently a very sociable man: that was his temperament. The feature of that temperament is that it does not like to be unpopular; out of standing with people whom it wants to please or who can affect its interests. This, therefore, is the tragedy of compromise for the sake of pleasantness and popularity. This is the disastrous leaning to policy instead of standing firm on principle when serious matters are on hand.

Yes, we know that it was no simple matter for Barnabas. This very incident brings out into clear definition the terrible strength of a system and tradition. All the holy vehemence of the greatest Apostle is drawn out in wrath by the strength of this system. This judaizing element was going to die hard. It had taken the devastating power of a personal appearing in glory on the part of the Lord to break Paul clear of it. It was going to be the everything-or-nothing question from then onward. If a mask of insincerity, prevarication, equivocation, and disguise was being put on, then Paul tore it off with no light hand. He saw too clearly the disaster of both the old system, and of trying to be two contrary things.

In this same chapter verse 20 occurs. Everybody knows Galatians 2:20. There it is shown that the Cross of Christ puts 'Finish' to this kind of thing. Later in the letter, reference will be made to "the offence of the cross". That offence in this context is in relation to compromise in order to save our face, our standing our advantage, and so on.

It is a sad revelation, and fact, that a "good man"; one who has seen great service for God; and has had association at close quarters with so much of God's work, can fall into the snare of 'safety first' rather than stand by truth and principle at all costs. This has much to teach us, but it is all summed up in the cry - 'Be true!' 'Be honest!' 'Be transparent!' Do not walk with men first, but walk before God. May it never be that all that may be so good and creditable eventually falls under this verdict - "...even Barnabas was carried away."

So, a great friendship and a vital colleagueship was threatened and then disrupted by - what? Was it a secret jealousy of the outworking of the sovereign choice and using of that 'vessel', the vessel over which Barnabas rejoiced until some personal interest or temperamental weakness was touched? Paul may have been a rather strong and sometimes overbearing man in the utterness of his abandon to what had come to him "by revelation of Jesus Christ". What he had to be *against*, still marked him as *for* Christ. One thing Paul could not countenance on any account was compromise. He was capable of being both very forceful and forbearing, but he was not capable of being double.

Barnabas may have wanted peace, and would do *anything* for it. But that *anything* might lead him into 'sitting on the fence' or trying to agree with two irreconcilable positions, and the end be that for

all time a "good man" made a terrible mistake, so that the potentialities of a great friendship and partnership were lost.

But the work must go on. Barnabas had an overwhelming amount of evidence as to where his friend stood, and how utterly he stood on this, the greatest dispensational, issue, and he allowed himself to be influenced by James and his strong leaning to the Jewish complexion. So, in the transition, which was making distinctions very clear and putting men on this side or on that, Barnabas *eventually* fades out. Silas (Silvanus) fills the gap, and even John Mark who brought the relationship to a crisis becomes - at length - 'profitable' to both Peter and Paul.

Turning corners is always a perilous time, and in the turning of the dispensations, in which these early saints were involved, there were not a few casualties.

The Lord help us to be true to all the light available.