

## The Length of Our Shadow

*Acts 9:26-31; 11:19-26*

*I have a little shadow that goes in and out with me,  
And what can be the use of him is more than I can see.  
He is very, very like me from the heels up to the head;  
And I see him jump before me, when I jump into my bed.*

So begins a poem by Robert Louis Stevenson that I learned as a child. It speaks of something which children find quite fascinating. Every living thing has a shadow in a physical sense, but only human beings have shadows in a spiritual sense, as well. You and I have shadows that fall across the paths of other human beings. Every day of our lives, we influence people, for good or evil.

Consider the length of your shadow. How far does it extend? How many lives does it touch? It is humbling to consider the number of people who are touched by our lives. William Wordsworth once wrote, “The daisy, by the shadow that it casts/Protects the lingering dewdrop from the sun.” He was saying that being able to cast a shadow implies a certain amount of responsibility for the people upon whom that shadow falls.

**Our church also has a spiritual shadow.** There are people all around us who need that extra word of encouragement to accept Christ. We are surrounded by people who are Christians, but who need our influence to grow deeper in Him and be more faithful to Him. But influencing someone for Christ does not happen automatically.

Perhaps we are unaware of it, but the shadows of our lives and of our church are falling all across our community. They fall across the lives of those individuals who not only attend our services and activities, but also across the lives of those with whom we come in contact as we go about our normal routines. And we may not realize it, but we are responsible for how they are impacted by our lives and our church.

Paul Lowney has said, “No one owns his own life. Everyone—no matter how insignificant—has an effect on someone else, just as a stone sends out ripples when

cast into still water. A person whose life doesn't touch another's is a person without a shadow."

The Scriptures take this a bit further. The teaching of the New Testament is plainly that you and I as Christians are to become responsible for other people, especially as that responsibility relates to their spiritual nurture and growth.

When Paul wrote to the Christians in Rome, he said, "*Accept him whose faith is weak, without passing judgment on disputable matters*" (14:1). Later in the same letter, Paul wrote, "*We who are strong ought to bear with the failings of the weak and not to please ourselves*" (15:1). He was writing about our responsibility to care for others, and to encourage them in their walk with Christ. He told the Christians in Galatia, "*Therefore as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers.*" The Scriptures clearly teach that you and I are responsible for the spiritual lives of others.

Paul emphasized encouragement in his ministry because he knew from his own personal experience how valuable encouragement can be. Early in his Christian experience there was a man who stood by him and encouraged him. **In fact, had it not been for this man, we probably would never have heard of the Apostle Paul.**

That man's name was **Joseph**. He was a Levite from Cyprus who not only greatly influenced Paul, but evidently influenced the ministry of the entire church as well. Joseph had a reputation for entering into the lives of people and picking them up when they were discouraged. He was known for the way in which he assumed responsibility for the spiritual growth and nurture of those who were just becoming a part of the Christian church. In fact, Joseph's reputation was so firmly established that the apostles gave him a nickname. They called him, "Son of Encouragement." We know him as "**Barnabas**."

Because of the important role he played, Barnabas becomes our example today as we strive to reach out to those who may be weaker in their faith, or who may not know Christ at all. But wait a minute: if I become involved in the life of someone else, what is required of me? What is involved in assuming responsibility for the spiritual welfare of another person? What is the church's responsibility? Today

we're going to look at two events in the life of Barnabas for several clues as to what is expected of us as more mature believers.

## **1 We must be ready to take risks, Acts 9:27**

In the ninth chapter of Acts, we see that Saul, who was later known as Paul, had become a Christian. That one who had spent much of his time traveling around looking for Christians to have imprisoned was now a Christian himself! After his conversion Saul lived in Damascus with other disciples of the Lord. He was probably there for about three years, before the local unbelieving Jews conspired to kill him because of his preaching. But Saul escaped, and made his way to Jerusalem.

In Jerusalem, he tried to join with the disciples there. But they were afraid that this was some sort of trick. They were probably wondering, "If he really has become one of us, why hasn't he tried to join with us before now?" The disciples really did not believe that Saul had been saved. And if he had not been saved, they were risking their very lives to be around Saul—he might have *them* arrested and thrown into prison!

William Barclay has observed, "The world is largely divided into those who think the best of others, and those who think the worst." These disciples were thinking the worst of Saul. But among them was a man who was willing to stick his neck out a little. Barnabas was willing to take the risk. He believed in Saul. He believed that his conversion experience was genuine. Barnabas was a man with a very long shadow, and within that shadow stood a genuine Christian, who needed someone to vouch for him.

Remember that Barnabas had a reputation for encouraging others, for believing in others, and eventually being proven right about them. So when Barnabas began to tell the disciples about Saul's conversion, and about how he had preached in the Name of Jesus in Damascus, he was taking a risk. Not only was he risking that reputation, but he was risking his life and the lives of all the Christians in Jerusalem. What if Saul actually turned out to be a spy, as the disciples feared?

Well, we say, that was fine for Barnabas to become involved in the life of Saul that way, but why should I involve myself to the point of taking a risk? Why should I

risk my reputation by associating with those whose past is questionable, and whose present motives are in doubt? Why should our church assume any risks in reaching out to people in our area? There are at least three reasons why we should be ready to assume any risk;

***First, no one else is able to do it.*** That is the way it was with Barnabas. No one else there had the gift of encouraging people as he did. No one else was ready to assume the risk. We who know the Lord Jesus Christ are qualified as no one else. If we have been loving and serving the Lord for any length of time, then we should be compassionate toward those who may not have worked through temptations as we have. We should be patient with those who have not been able to firm up their convictions as of yet.

***Second, we should take the risk because it appears that no one else is going to do it.*** Only after he saw the other disciples refuse to believe Saul's testimony did Barnabas step to the front. No one else was going to do it! We as believers in the Lord Jesus Christ cannot expect that anyone else is going to reach out to others to influence them for Christ, or to encourage newer or weaker Christians, if we don't. We are the ones who must do it!

***Third, we should take the risk because no one else is responsible to do it.*** It wasn't the responsibility of the Jewish Sanhedrin to encourage Saul. They considered him a traitor! Barnabas knew that ***all*** the Christians were responsible, and that is why he took the risk. We cannot ignore our responsibility any longer.

Paul talked about how involving ourselves in helping someone else could be risky. He wrote, "*Brothers, if someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently.*" But there is a risk, and here it is: "*But watch yourself, or you also may be tempted. Carry each other's burdens and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ*" (Galatians 6:1-2). Jesus told Peter that involving himself in the spiritual lives of others would involve a great deal of risk, to the point that one day Peter would lose his life on that account (John 21:18).

There is risk involved in helping others, folks! But if they are ever to be encouraged to come to Christ, and then be encouraged in their new life in Christ, then you and I must be willing to take that risk. If we don't, who will?

## **2 We must be open to the Holy Spirit, Acts 11:22-24**

After some time had passed, the Gospel began to spread. Some unnamed men traveled to Antioch of Syria and began to preach the message of Jesus to some Greeks. We read in Acts 11:21 that *“The Lord’s hand was with them, and a great number of people believed and turned to the Lord.”* The church in Jerusalem heard about it, and decided to send someone to Antioch to investigate. They wanted to make certain that these people were having genuine conversion experiences. These disciples in Jerusalem were beginning to understand just how responsible they were in caring for newer Christians, and just how far their shadows extended.

They could have chosen to send a man who rigidly followed the Law of Moses, who would not be open to anything other than what had been for centuries. They could have chosen a man whose mind was closed to any experience other than the one he had had with the Lord. But they didn’t. They chose Barnabas. Barnabas was the most logical choice, because being who he was, he was most qualified to encourage these believers. He was from nearby Cyprus, and so could probably identify with them a little better than anyone else. But I think that underneath all the human reasons, they chose Barnabas because of the characteristics we see in verse 24: *“He was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and faith.”*

He was open to the Spirit’s leading, and that is why, when he arrived in Antioch and saw what the Lord was doing, the Scripture records that *“he was glad”* (v. 23). Barnabas was glad because he maintained an openness to the Spirit of the Lord. That was what enabled him to rejoice when he saw the grace of God as it was given to these new believers.

Someone (Johann Wolfgang von Goethe) said a long time ago, “There is strong shadow where there is much light.” If you and I stay close to the Light, if we stay open to the Spirit of God, then the shadows that our lives cast across the paths of others will be strong, and will influence those others for our Lord Jesus Christ.

The opposite is true as well. Hilaire Belloc has said, “There falls no shadow where there shines no sun.” Our shadows will be almost invisible in a spiritual sense if we

are not open to the Spirit. And as believers, we are expected to be open to the Spirit of God as He moves in our lives and in our church.

### **3 We must know how to encourage, Acts 11:23**

Barnabas wasn't just glad about what the Lord was doing in their lives. He didn't just pat them on the back and go his merry way. He wished to involve himself in their lives. Barnabas was a man who felt responsibility for others and their relationship with Christ. So we read in verse 23 that "*he was glad and encouraged them to remain true to the Lord with all their hearts.*"

When we look at Barnabas, we find that there are two sides to encouragement. First there is the obvious side, in that **encouragement is an involvement in another's life to give comfort and consolation**. It is obvious that when you encourage someone you are helping them and strengthening them. Certainly that is what Barnabas was doing here. Certainly that is what you are doing for someone when you reach out to encourage them.

But the other side of encouragement is perhaps not so obvious. In verse 23, we see that Barnabas "*encouraged them,*" but let's read the rest of the verse! It says "*He encouraged them to remain true to the Lord with all their hearts.*" **The other side of encouragement is that of "beseeching" or "exhorting,"** and indeed, that is how the King James Version translates this word many times. The other aspect of encouragement is that of urging people to walk a constant, steady walk with Christ. This is what Paul was doing when he urged the Colossian Christians to "*live a life worthy of the Lord and...please him in every way*" (1:10). This is what Barnabas was doing, and it is what you and I must do in order to become effective encouragers.

**This is the element missing so often in our encouragement.** We care for people, and we invite them to church, and we help them, but somehow we stop short of exhorting them to remain true to the Lord with all their hearts. We seem to have listened to Satan when he whispered to us that we should mind our own business, that that person's relationship with the Lord is a personal thing, and we shouldn't involve ourselves in that. So we may help them temporarily, but in the long run, we haven't really done a thing to help them in their spiritual growth.



That's why when we invite someone to church, they may come for a while and then drop out. We've told them that we miss them, that we wish they'd come back, and that they would be blessed if they did, but we haven't really encouraged them in the Biblical sense. **We've put the emphasis on attending church, rather than on remaining true to the Lord with all their heart.**

When Paul was looking for someone to help him in his ministry, he looked for a person who knew how to encourage others. Timothy was the one who fit the description, and Paul wrote to the church at Thessalonica: *"We sent Timothy, who is our brother and God's fellow worker in spreading the gospel of Christ, to strengthen and encourage you in your faith."* When Paul was seeking to train young Titus in the ministry, he had much to say to him about encouraging others. He said that an elder of the church *"must hold firmly to the trustworthy message as it has been taught, so that he can encourage others by sound doctrine and refute those who oppose it"* (1:9). He told Titus to *"encourage them young men to be self-controlled"* (2:6) and that includes this idea of exhortation. And then, finally, Paul told Titus to *"encourage and rebuke with all authority"* (2:15) because the two go together.

Paul was only asking Titus to do what he himself had done. He told the Thessalonian Christians, *"For you know that we dealt with each of you as a father deals with his own children, encouraging, comforting and urging you to live lives worthy of God"* (1 Thessalonians 2:11-12).

Casting a shadow across the path of someone else requires that you and I learn how to encourage them as they deal with the issues of life, to help them and strengthen them, but also being bold enough to involve ourselves with them to the point of exhorting them to remain true to the Lord.

**How long is our shadow? How great is our influence here?** We must acknowledge that we are going to have an influence, whether we like it or not. We determine how long our shadow is going to be, and we determine how many people we reach. But to make sure that our shadow reaches a long way, we as a Church must determine that we are going to be ready to take a few risks, that we are going to be open to the leadership of the Holy Spirit, and that we are going to make a difference through the way we encourage others to remain true to the Lord with all

their hearts. We cannot say that we are obedient children of our Heavenly Father until we have assumed the responsibility for others, a responsibility that God's Word says we are to have.

Consider the length of your shadow! Consider the length of our church's shadow! Whom do they touch, as we move about our daily lives? And what difference does it make?



