



# Barnabas

## AND THE EARLY CHURCH

By Gary Hardin

**T**HE APOSTLES DEFINED Barnabas's role in the ministry of the early church by paying him a high compliment—his nickname, which meant “Son of Encouragement” (see Acts 4:36). Barnabas excelled at encouraging and admonishing others.

Barnabas first appears in Scripture as a generous Christian who sold some property, then placed the proceeds at the apostles' feet so the money could be distributed to people in need (v. 37). In compiling what

would become the Book of Acts, Luke viewed Barnabas as a positive example of someone who used his gifts and resources to help people.

The Bible does not tell us when or how Barnabas came to faith in Christ. Most likely his conversion came about through the apostles' preaching soon after Jesus' resurrection.

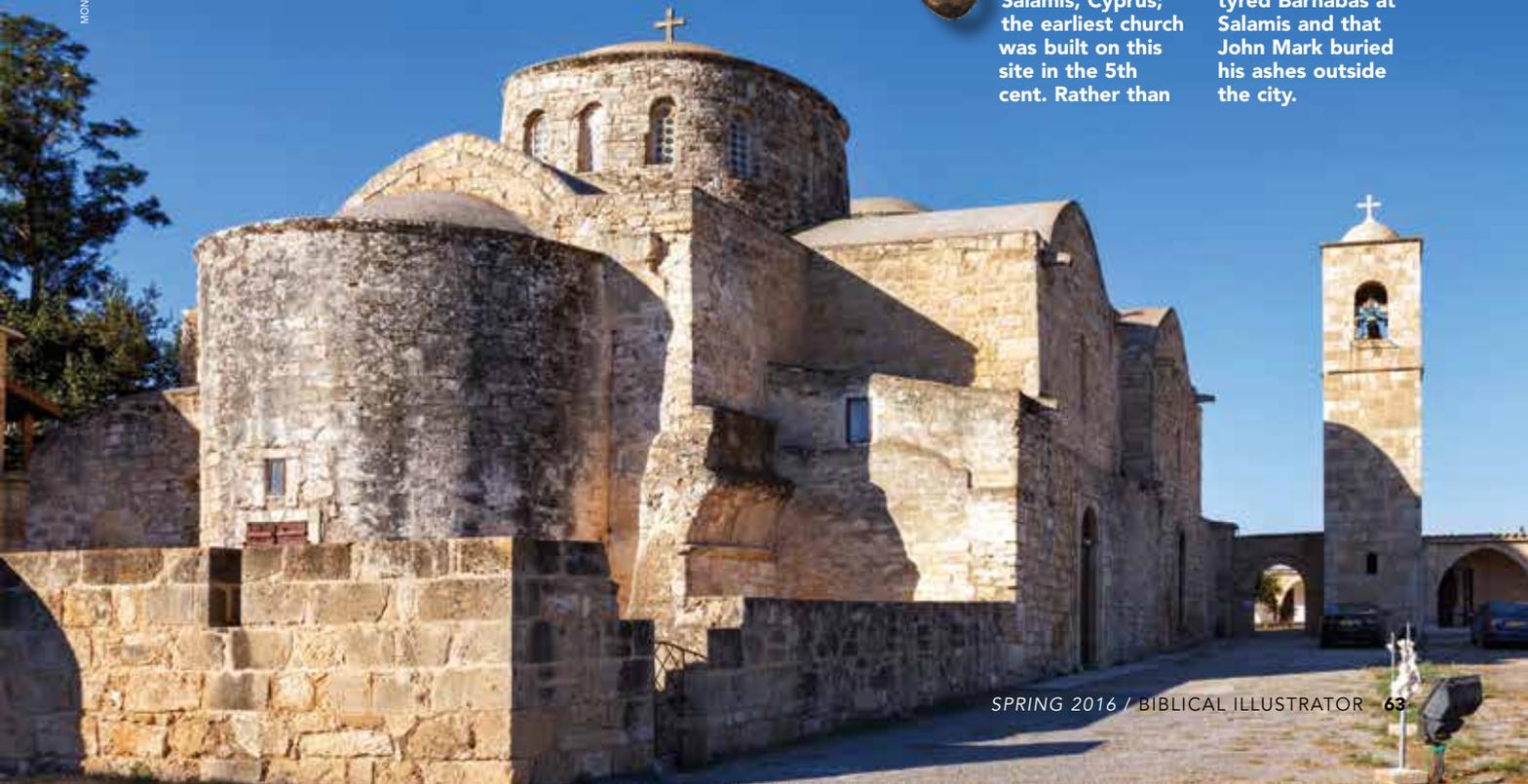
Acts 4:36 explains that Barnabas lived on

Cyprus and that he descended from the tribe of Levi. The priests of ancient Israel came from this tribe. Not all Levites served as priests; some served as doorkeepers or musicians in the temple, as scribes, or teachers of the Law. Typically, Levites were

**Left: Iron keys; some of the Levite priests served as doorkeepers in the Jerusalem temple.**

**Below: The Monastery of St. Barnabas at Salamis, Cyprus; the earliest church was built on this site in the 5th cent. Rather than**

**accompany Paul on a second missionary journey, Barnabas took John Mark to Cyprus in order to share the gospel there. An early tradition claims that Jews martyred Barnabas at Salamis and that John Mark buried his ashes outside the city.**



wealthy and well-educated. But the reference to “a Levite and a Cypriot by birth”<sup>1</sup> (4:36) lets us know that Barnabas was a Jew of the Diaspora, one of those who were scattered from the land of promise into other parts of the world. This scattering took place over several centuries. As early as 330 B.C., a colony of Jews lived on Cyprus.

By the time of the New Testament, many Jews lived outside of the promised land. Thus, in almost every city that Paul visited on his missionary journeys, he found a synagogue (see 14:1; 17:1,10; 18:4). The Diaspora actually helped spread the gospel.

Luke loaded Barnabas with many accolades calling him, “a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and of faith” (11:24); a prophet and teacher (13:1); an apostle (14:14); and one through whom God had worked miracles (15:12).

Barnabas proved his nickname by befriending Saul soon after his Damascus Road conversion (9:26-27). Most followers of Jesus did not trust Saul at the time because of his past persecution of Christians. Barnabas explained to them how God had

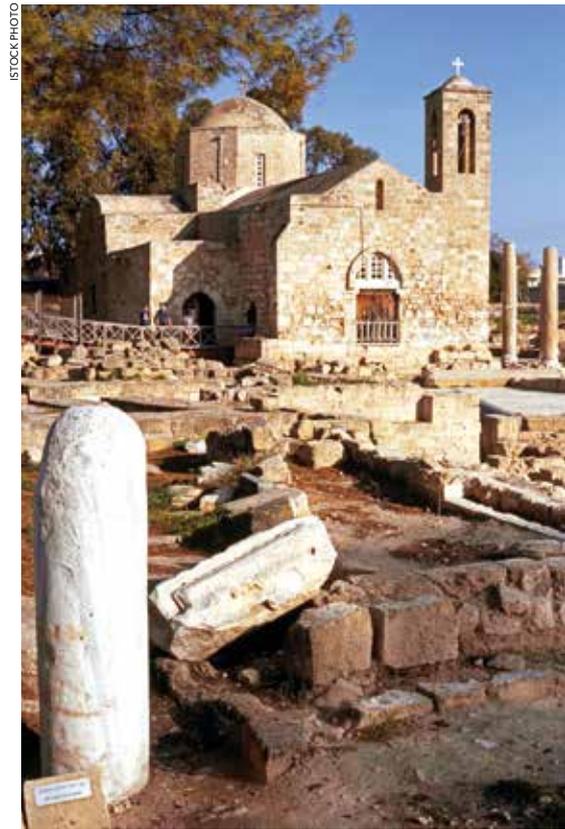
saved Saul and that Saul had seen the Lord and had received a message from Him.

Some Jewish and Greek believers had scattered after Stephen’s martyrdom and had made their way to Antioch of Syria (11:19). Their witness resulted in a spiritually vibrant congregation in Antioch. The church at Jerusalem sent Barnabas to Antioch to check out the happenings there. When Barnabas saw the need for teachers for these new believers, he searched for Saul. For a year, the two men “met with the church and taught large numbers” (v. 26). Their ministry in Antioch gave rise to a new name for believers, “Christians” (v. 26).

Christians at Antioch gave money

**Right: Greek Orthodox church on the island of Paphos. In the foreground are**

**the remains of an ancient Jewish synagogue and what has been named “Paul’s Pillar.”**



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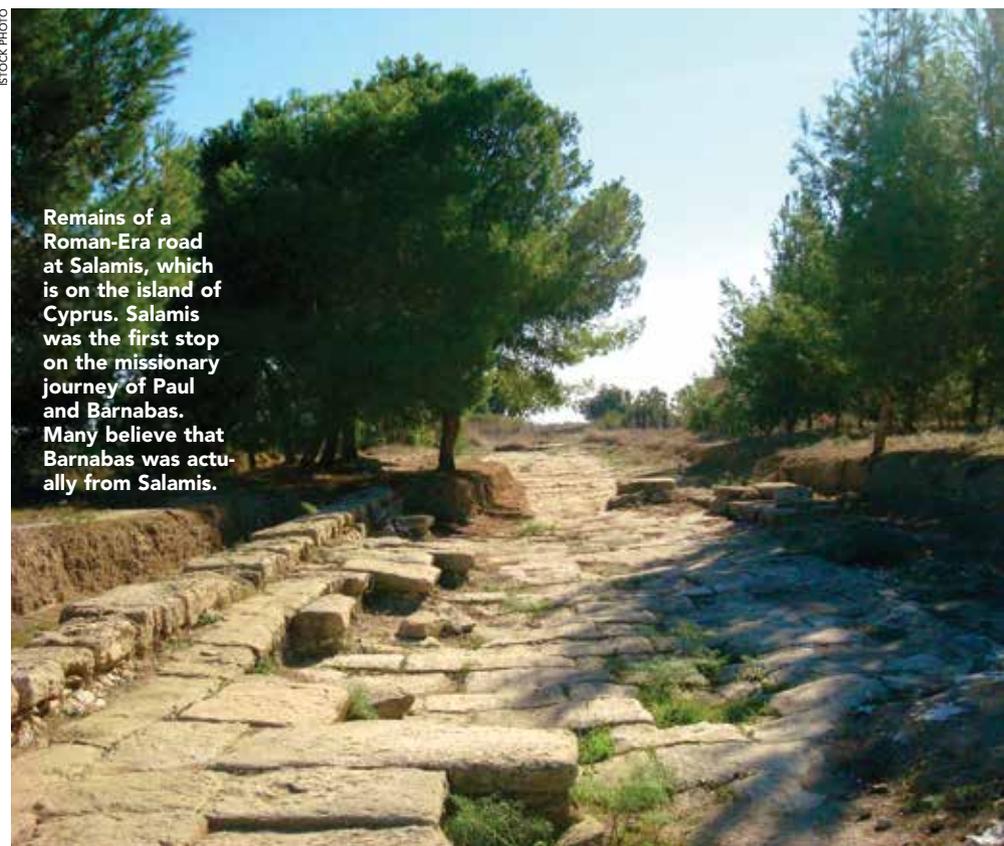
## FAST FACT

### WHO WAS JOHN MARK?

**J**ohn was his Hebrew name; Mark was his Roman surname. He came to Christ, likely because of Simon Peter’s witness (1 Pet. 5:13). Christian tradition dating to the first century names John Mark as the writer of the Gospel of Mark. Many believe that Simon Peter provided John Mark with details about Jesus and His ministry.

Sources: Herbert Lockyer, *All of the Men of the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1958), 229-30; see also the “Introduction to the Gospel of Mark” in the HCSB Study Bible (Nashville: Holman Bible Publishers, 2010), 1676.

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**Remains of a Roman-Era road at Salamis, which is on the island of Cyprus. Salamis was the first stop on the missionary journey of Paul and Barnabas. Many believe that Barnabas was actually from Salamis.**

## WHAT ABOUT CYPRUS IN BARNABAS'S DAY?

**D**uring the first millennium B.C., Cyprus was dominated by a succession of rulers, including the Assyrians, Greeks, and Ptolemies. During the Ptolemaic period (323–30 B.C.), Jews settled in Cyprus; by the first century A.D., they had a thriving community on the island. In 58 B.C., the Romans annexed Cyprus into the province of Cilicia. Augustus in 22 B.C. made it a Senatorial Province.

Under Roman rule, Cyprus had an urban identity; its stronger cities were located along the island's coasts. Major construction projects occurred during this period, including new temples, baths, aqueducts, and markets.

Cypriots worshiped primarily either at the temples honoring the Roman gods Zeus and Apollo and the goddess Aphrodite—or at the synagogue. Both Paul's and Barnabas's backgrounds prepared them for sharing the gospel in a mixed Jewish and Gentile culture. This fact, and Barnabas being a native of Cyprus, may have been catalysts the Holy Spirit used to prompt Paul and Barnabas to make Cyprus the location for their first missionary stop. 🔥

Sources: Thomas V. Brisco, "Cyprus" in *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary* (Nashville: Holman Bible Publishers, 2003) 375-77; Thomas W. Davis, "Saint Paul on Cyprus: Archaeology and the Transformation of an Apostle," *Perspectives on Science and Faith* [online; accessed 19 August 2015]. Available from the Internet: [www.asa3.org/ASA/PSCF/2012/PSCF12-12Davis.pdf](http://www.asa3.org/ASA/PSCF/2012/PSCF12-12Davis.pdf)



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**Left: The Attalia harbor from which Paul and Barnabas left Asia Minor after Paul's preaching at Perga on**

**the first missionary journey. The two sailed from Attalia back to Antioch, their commissioning church.**

toward a relief offering for the hurting Christians who lived in Judea. Barnabas and Saul were asked to deliver the offering (11:27-30). After completing this mission, Barnabas and Saul returned to Antioch, having picked up John Mark, Barnabas's cousin, on the way (Acts 12:25; Col. 4:10).

Led by the Holy Spirit, the congregation at Antioch commissioned Barnabas and Saul as missionaries, and then sent them off. John Mark accompanied them as a helper (Acts 13:2-3,5).

The team of missionaries arrived in Salamis, a city on the island of Cyprus; Barnabas and Saul gave a Christian witness in the synagogues

there (vv. 4-5). At Paphos, a Roman proconsul sent for Barnabas and Saul because he wanted to "hear God's message" (v. 7).

At this point in his writing, Luke began to refer to Saul (his Hebrew name) as Paul (Roman name; see v. 9). Also during this missionary journey Luke began listing Paul's name before Barnabas's name signifying Paul's emerging leadership (vv. 7,13).

The team next traveled to Antioch of Pisidia where Paul preached in the synagogue; the leaders invited him to speak again on the next Sabbath (vv. 14,42). Paul and Barnabas encouraged the synagogue members to "continue in the grace of God" (v. 43).

But some of the Jews in Pisidian Antioch who rejected the gospel message stirred up persecution against the missionaries, and expelled them from the area (vv. 45-52). Similar persecution occurred at the next stop in Iconium, a city in Asia Minor. The missionaries fled to Lystra and Derbe (towns in Asia Minor) where they continued to evangelize (14:1-7).

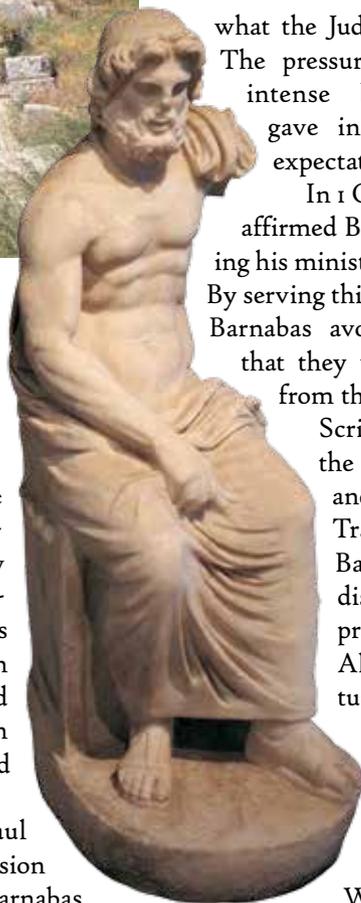
In Lystra, God performed a miracle of healing (vv. 8-11). The townspeople said of Paul and Barnabas, "the gods have come down to us in the form of men" (v. 11). They gave Barnabas the name "Zeus," and Paul the name "Hermes." (The Roman names for these gods were Jupiter and Mercury.) Barnabas and Paul tore their robes because they felt horrified that people were about to worship them (vv. 14-18).

At that point, angry Jews from Pisidian Antioch and Iconium stoned Paul, dragged him out of the city, and left him for dead. The text does not indicate that Barnabas was stoned or injured in any way. The next day the missionaries left for Derbe (vv. 19-20).



**Left: Partial ruins of the Greco-Roman theater at Perga; the theater seated about 14,000. Perga, which was one of the places Paul and Barnabas visited on their missionary journey, was a major port city of the ancient region of Pamphilia.**

**Below: Roman statue of Zeus, found at Pergamum; Seeing the miracle at Lystra of the cripple man being healed and able to walk, the people thought the gods had visited them in human form. They called Barnabas, "Zeus."**



In Derbe many came to Christ, so Barnabas and Paul made the decision to return back to Lystra, Iconium, and Antioch of Pisidia—reminding new believers “it is necessary to pass through many troubles on our way into the kingdom of God” (vv. 21-22). We can wonder if Paul, no doubt bloody and bruised from the stoning in Lystra, made the decision to return to these towns as a result of Barnabas’s encouragement.

Paul and Barnabas strengthened the disciples and appointed elders in all the churches in these areas. Next, after witnessing in Pamphylia, Perga, and Attalia, they sailed back to Antioch of Syria where they reported what God had done, specifically in opening doors to Gentile outreach (vv. 21-28).

After this first missions trip, the report of Gentile conversions led to a debate regarding whether Gentile converts should be circumcised and required to obey the Law of Moses in order to be saved (15:1-2,5). Paul and Barnabas were appointed to serve with a group of believers who gathered in Jerusalem (the Jerusalem Council) to settle this question of circumcision and adherence to the

Law. Barnabas and Paul shared news of all that God had done among Gentiles on their first mission trip (v. 12). The council concluded that Gentiles would not be required to be circumcised or obey the Law as requirements for salvation (v. 19). Barnabas and Paul, along with some other men, traveled back to Syrian Antioch to share this good news (vv. 22-29).

Sometime later, Paul sensed that a second mission trip would be in order. Barnabas suggested they take John Mark with them again. Paul disagreed sharply. So Barnabas took John Mark and sailed toward Cyprus. Paul chose Silas and sailed to Syria and Cilicia (vv. 36-41).

Galatians 2 records a lapse in Barnabas’s normally good judgment. Peter, a Jew, ate and fellowshiped with Gentiles. But when a group of Judaizers (those who wanted Gentiles to be circumcised and to obey the Law) arrived, Peter withdrew from the Gentiles, afraid of

what the Judaizers might think. The pressure must have been intense because Barnabas gave in to the Judaizers’ expectations (Gal. 2:11-13).

In 1 Corinthians 9:6, Paul affirmed Barnabas for supporting his ministry by working a job. By serving this way, both Paul and Barnabas avoided the criticism that they were taking money from the churches.

Scripture is silent about the later life, final days, and death of Barnabas. Tradition says that Barnabas had been a disciple of Jesus, had preached in Rome and Alexandria, and eventually became the first bishop of the church in Milan. Another tradition says that Barnabas wrote the Epistle of Barnabas.

Writing in the third century, Clement of Alexandria claimed Barnabas was one of the 70 that Jesus sent out (Luke 10:1). These claims and traditions, however, are without validity.<sup>2</sup>

1. All Scripture quotations are from the Holman Christian Standard Bible (HCSB).

2. James A. Brooks, “Barnabas” in *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary*, gen. ed. Chad Brand, Charles Draper, and Archie England (Nashville: Holman Bible Publishers, 2003), 173.

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