

The Team of a Leader

Rich Nathan

June 8, 2014

Strength in Weakness: Leadership Lessons from the Life of Paul Ecclesiastes 4:9-12

I read a story several years ago about a man who responded to his insurance company's request for more information regarding the man's multiple injuries. When he first filed a claim, he said his injuries were due to:

Doing the job alone

So, he wrote back and filled in some of the details. He said he is a bricklayer by trade and he was working on the 6th floor of a building that was under construction. He discovered that he had about 500 pounds of bricks left over. He had a large barrel which he attached to a pulley on the 6th floor and then went down to the ground floor and tied the barrel off. He then filled the barrel with the bricks and untied the barrel attempting to lower it down by himself.

He said he was immediately hoisted off the ground since he only weighs 145 pounds. He wrote:

I met the barrel on the 3rd floor which was the cause of my skull fractures. As the barrel continued to rapidly descend, I was hoisted up to the 6th floor where I smashed my forearm on the pulley. The barrel smashed on the ground spilling all the bricks which lightened the load and I rapidly descended. I met the barrel again on my way down which is the cause of my ankle fractures. Fortunately, hitting the barrel caused me to slow down before I hit the ground.

He concluded saying:

I hope I've furnished enough information to explain why my multiple injuries were caused by...

Doing the job alone

Now, this was a tongue-in-cheek letter, but it has some great points in it about how much we need help to do life well. For nearly four decades, since Marlene and I were in married, we've had these Bible verses that we received on a calligraphy scroll as a wedding gift posted on our bedroom wall. The verses are from the Book of Ecclesiastes. Here is what they read:

Ecclesiastes 4:9–12 (NIV)

- 9 Two are better than one,
because they have a good return for their labor:
10 If either of them falls down,
one can help the other up.
But pity anyone who falls
and has no one to help them up.
11 Also, if two lie down together, they will keep warm.
But how can one keep warm alone?
12 Though one may be overpowered,
two can defend themselves.
A cord of three strands is not quickly broken.

These verses don't just apply to marriage. Not doing things alone and doing things as a team is a secret to success in all of life. Ecclesiastes says a rope that has three strands wrapped together is hard to break. And this, by the way, is the secret to a suspension bridge's strength. You know big giant cables hold up suspension bridges like the Verrazano Bridge in New York or the Golden Gate Bridge in San Francisco. But if you cut a cross-section of the cables holding up the bridge, you would find that the cables are not single cables, but are many smaller cables that are wound together. Because many strands that are wound together are much harder to break than a single cable.

About 8 years ago Doris Kearns Goodwin wrote a best-selling book on Lincoln titled [Team of Rivals](#).

Book Cover for [Team of Rivals](#)

What the book lays out in the most extraordinary way is that one of the secrets to Lincoln's success was his incredible ability to win over ambitious political rivals and forge them together in an incredible high-performance team that ended up winning the Civil War and freeing the slaves.

This past Friday was the 70th anniversary of D-Day, the invasion of Nazi-occupied Europe by the combined Allied Forces. I read a biography about Dwight Eisenhower, who was called Ike. Ike was the Supreme Allied Commander during WWII. One of the things that military historians cite as an often-overlooked reason for the Allied victory on the Western Front is that Ike was an incredible team builder. He was able to forge a united effort among the Allies. Now this was totally different than in WWI where each of the Allies – France, England, and the US – had completely separate command structures and fought their battles utterly alone, siloed off from each other, in an uncoordinated way. In fact in WWI, the Allies frequently kept their plans secret from each other. But what Ike was able to do was pull together an incredible coalition of leaders many of whom were prima donnas. Those of you who are familiar with history might know that the

egos that he had to deal with – folks like General Patton, or British General Montgomery, or Winston Churchill and Charles De Gaulle – were challenging teammates. But in Ike’s words, he said:

I always kept my eye on the ball. We needed to work together to achieve victory.

Today as we continue in a series that I’ve been doing on the life of the Apostle Paul, we’re going to see that teamwork is not just essential in having a thriving marriage, teamwork is not just essential in warfare or in sports, teamwork is essential in building God’s kingdom. I’ve called today’s talk, The Team of a Leader. Let’s pray.

The Bible is filled with stories of amazing teams. I think of Moses and Aaron, Moses and Joshua, David and Jonathan, David and his Mighty Men, Elijah and Elisha, Jesus and the 12. Now, some teams were teams of colleagues and some were clearly mentor/mentee relationships. Today, I would like us to consider the two most prominent teammates of the Apostle Paul, Barnabas and Timothy.

First, let’s look at Barnabas.

Acts 4:36–37 (NIV)

36 Joseph, a Levite from Cyprus, whom the apostles called Barnabas (which means “son of encouragement”), 37 sold a field he owned and brought the money and put it at the apostles’ feet.

The text tells us that Barnabas’ real name was Joseph. He is a Jewish Levite from the island of Cypress. So, he is bicultural. He has deep Jewish roots. The Levites, of course, were the religious assistants to the priests in the Temple. Barnabas has deep Jewish roots and he is also totally at home in the Greco-Roman world. He makes a great missionary. He is totally bicultural. He had a background very similar to the Apostle Paul’s.

An early church father, Tertullian, said that Barnabas wrote the book of Hebrews in the Bible which is as good as suggestion as any I’ve come across. The book of Hebrews is concerned with the Temple rituals and all of the sacrifices. It makes sense that it would have been written by a Levite and it calls itself a message of encouragement which was Barnabas’ great strength. Barnabas shows up at watershed moments in the Book of Acts where the work of God could have been stopped. Barnabas’ presence propels God’s work forward. And Barnabas shows up at crucial moments in Paul’s letters. This man is absolutely vital to the success of God’s work in the New Testament church. What made Barnabas such a high impact teammate and colleague of the Apostle Paul?

Barnabas was an encourager

Barnabas was the nickname of a man named Joseph.

SLIDE Acts 4:36 (NIV)

36 Joseph, a Levite from Cyprus, whom the apostles called Barnabas (which means “son of encouragement”),

Now, Barnabas is probably derived from the Hebrew

Bar = Son

Nabi = Prophet

Literally, Barnabas’s name might mean “the son of a prophet” which means he embodied the qualities of a prophet. He proclaimed, he exhorted, he encouraged. There is no doubt that as we read through the book of Acts we discover that Barnabas had one of the biggest hearts of anyone in the New Testament church. Everywhere he goes, he encourages people.

Maya Angelou recently died.

Photo of Maya Angelou

She was, of course, an author, a poet, a dancer, and a singer. She had a long list of books and essays, movies, plays, and TV shows. She once famously said,

People don’t always remember what you say or even what you do, but they always remember how you made them feel.

~Maya Angelou

When people were around Barnabas, they felt encouraged.

What is encouragement?

Encouragement is all about cheering other people on.

Encouragement = cheering other people on

Think about how good it feels to know that someone is in your corner, cheering you on, wanting you to do well. There are always tons of people around us who correct us, who catch us doing something wrong. Here is a little bit of family wisdom for those of us who want to have a happier, more positive family experience. Catch your spouse doing something right and affirm that. You know, I really appreciate that you get up early and make me coffee. I’ll bet they’ll repeat that behavior. Do you want to improve your relationship with your teenager, catch your teenager doing something right? Some of you might say, “That’s really hard to do, Rich.” But catch your teen doing something

right. “Hey, thanks for unloading the dishwasher. Thanks for calling when you got home. I appreciate you writing to your grandmother. That really made her happy.”

Peter Drucker, who is widely considered to be the father of modern management, said:

Encouragers build on people’s strengths so that their weaknesses become almost irrelevant.

~Peter Drucker

Everyone needs encouragement. Mother Teresa said:

Being unwanted, unloved, uncared for, forgotten by everybody: I think that is a much greater hunger, a much greater poverty than the person who has nothing to eat.

~Mother Teresa

Listen, people in the United States are mostly not starving for food. But everyone is starving for encouragement. It doesn’t matter if you are the boss, or the newest employee, a teacher or a student, a coach or a player, a pastor or a church member. Here is one thing I know about every person that you and I will ever meet: everyone wants to be encouraged. Everyone wants to know that there is someone in our corner cheering us on. Everyone wants to be caught doing something right. Everyone wants to be thanked.

Let’s face it. Life is hard. And even though many of us have a personal relationship with Jesus Christ that is making a real difference in our lives right now, we still live in a broken, fallen world. Life is hard. We need encouragement to keep going. God uses people of any age, any race, rich, poor, single, married, any level of maturity to encourage. You do not have to have a certain bank account in order to encourage. You may be flat broke and you are still able to encourage someone else. You don’t have to have an advanced degree. You may only have a 6th grade education and you still are able to encourage. You don’t have to be a certain age. A 75-year old can encourage a 17 year old and a 17-year old can encourage a 75-year old.

How do we encourage?

Richard Foster, in his book titled The Challenge of a Disciplined Life,

Book Cover of The Challenge of a Disciplined Life by Richard Foster

...opened one of his chapters saying this:

There is a power that destroys. There is a power that also creates. The power that creates gives life and joy and peace. ...The power that creates restores

relationship and gives the gift of wholeness to all. The power that creates is spiritual power, the power that proceeds from God.

Let's drop this down for a moment and make it practical. How do we release the power that creates, the power that builds, the power that gives life and peace and restores wholeness? How do we release in very real terms the power of God in our day to day interactions with other people?

One way is by paying attention to our words. Words are so powerful. Proverbs 18:21 says:

Proverbs 18:21 (NIV)

21 The tongue has the power of life and death,
and those who love it will eat its fruit.

We have the power to kill and the power to give life just by our words. So often people speak death words to others, words that hurt, words that create humiliation and feelings of resentment, words that leave lasting wounds that cause infection in our souls. And then there are life words that build people up, that increase confidence. Life words that encourage hope and cause people to want to keep going on without quitting.

I'll bet everyone of us here can think back to a time many years ago when we were children or teens, young adults, and someone spoke death words to us, brought shame into your life and even now you can still feel the sting of those words. Maybe a kid at school mocked us because of our physical appearance, the fact that we wore glasses or braces, or were overweight or spoke with a lisp, had some physical trait or wore the wrong sneakers, or weren't great at sports, something about us. Maybe your parents spoke death words to you.

I remember reading a great book on parenting by Pastor Gordon MacDonald. It was called The Effective Father. He talked about a counseling appointment he had with a man who was frantically working himself into exhaustion. He spent very dime he has on luxury and status symbols; constantly angry. And as this man allowed Pastor MacDonald to look into his soul concerning what was driving all of these destructive behaviors – the need to appear great, the defensiveness whenever he was challenged – all of this was rooted in death words that his father used to speak over him all the time. His father regularly said to him during his teen years, "Tom, you are a bum. You will never amount to anything. You're always going to be a bum."

And in contrast, life words are blessing words. One of the most neglected ways to bless someone else is through words of encouragement. I want you to see how this played out in the life of Paul's teammate, Barnabas, who had this extraordinary gift of encouragement,

Who do we encourage?

Barnabas encouraged the fearful

Here is what we read in Acts 9:26-28:

Acts 9:26–28 (NIV)

26 When he [Paul] came to Jerusalem, he tried to join the disciples, but they were all afraid of him, not believing that he really was a disciple. 27 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. 28 So Saul stayed with them and moved about freely in Jerusalem, speaking boldly in the name of the Lord.

Saul, who later became known as Paul, had recently been converted to Christ. He used to persecute Christians and now he is claiming to be converted. People were naturally fearful of him. How do we know if he is the real deal? Maybe he is just a spy, someone who is going to find out about our leadership, our meeting times, who all the members of our group are, where all of our Bibles are, and then he is going to have us all arrested. This is a ploy that is used all over the world today – the secret police in Iran, in Muslim countries, in China, in Russia often go undercover. They meet a Christian, claim to be interested, pretend to be converted so that they might be invited to a secret gathering of Christian believers, and then everyone in the group is arrested.

People were fearful of Paul. Can we trust this guy? We know that he's been sent out by the Sanhedrin, the Jewish leadership, but is he really converted? Everyone was afraid – all except Barnabas.

One way that the Old Testament expresses the notion of encouragement is by the repeated phrase, "Fear not." Over and over the encourager goes to the fearful and says, "Fear not; you can do it." Isn't it interesting that over and over again in sports there is some barrier that people say is unbreakable and then someone comes along and breaks it and immediately a bunch of other people break the barrier? For example, the 4-minute mile was considered to be the limit of human capacity. For years people tried to run a mile under 4 minutes, but nobody was able to do it. And then an English doctor named Roger Bannister,

Photo of Roger Bannister

...broke the record. And within four years 20 other people ran a sub-four-minute mile. In fact, these days, occasionally you will have a high schooler who is able to run the mile in under four minutes.

Leaders are always dealing with fearful people who have hit barriers that they think are unbreakable. Maybe you are involved with someone's marriage that is on the rocks and you are trying to encourage this couple towards reconciliation. There are lots of folks who are afraid to trust that change could happen in their spouse's life through marriage counseling. They are afraid to open themselves up to their spouses, especially if their spouses brought them hurt in the past. There are many people who are afraid to trust the power of God in someone else's life.

What an encourager does is they come to the fearful and they say, "Don't be afraid." We experience fear every time we come to a barrier that we don't think we can break through. "I don't think I could ever go back to this marriage." "I don't think we could ever break free of this addiction; it's gone on too long."

Small group leaders, part of your job is to encourage the fearful. Just this week in my small group one of the leaders said, "Listen, we're going to try a way of praying that they do in the Vineyard." In the small group that Marlene and I recently joined, they historically gathered in little groups of men and little groups of women and people would talk to one another, share their particular prayer requests, and then people would pray. It is not a bad way to pray, but one of the leaders of my small group said, "Let's pray the way they do at Vineyard. Let's take some to listen to what the Holy Spirit is saying and then let's take a risk and share what you're hearing." He said, "I know this is scary, but I know we can do it."

That's what leaders do. We say to the fearful, "You can hear from God. You can pray for the sick. You can share your faith. God wants to use you in the life of someone else. God may be calling you to start a ministry, to work with kids who have disabilities, to bring a foster child into your home."

Barnabas encouraged the fearful.

Barnabas encouraged the faithful

Acts 11:22–24 (NIV)

22 News of this reached the church in Jerusalem, and they sent Barnabas to Antioch. 23 When he arrived and saw what the grace of God had done, he was glad and encouraged them all to remain true to the Lord with all their hearts. 24 He was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and faith, and a great number of people were brought to the Lord.

I've always loved v. 23.

Acts 11:23 (NIV)

23 When he arrived and saw what the grace of God had done, he was glad and encouraged them all to remain true to the Lord with all their hearts.

Barnabas saw the grace of God and he was glad. The Jerusalem church was concerned. They heard that the gospel message was spreading beyond the boundaries of Jews, uncircumcised Gentiles were receiving the Good News that God had sent a Savior into the world to save us from all the things we can't save ourselves from, power that are too strong. God has sent a Savior to rescue us from the power of sin, from the power of addiction, from the power of Satan, from the wrath of God. The Gentiles were responding. The Jerusalem church was concerned, so they sent Barnabas to check it out. What a great choice! They sent the biggest hearted guy to find out what was going on in Antioch.

Encouragers are people who see God at work when other people just see problems. Anyone can see the obvious. It takes no great gift of discernment to see problems. People think they have the gift of discernment because they can spot other people's problems or flaws in the church. "It is obvious that you have this and this deficiency." That's not a gift of discernment. Everyone can see that.

As the old Calvinists used to say:

Sin is a sign on your back that everyone else can read, but you.

But it takes a special gift, an anointing from God, if you will, to see God at work even in the midst of a mess. Encouragers are always asking the question: What do you think God is up to? What do you think God is doing in the midst of all the stress that you are experiencing at work? What do you think God is doing in your life? What do you think God is up to in your family? Encouragers look for God.

I'm sure there was lots of doctrinal mess in Antioch. I'm sure that the people there sang different songs than Barnabas was used to in Jerusalem. I'm sure they did church services different than the Jewish believers did back in Jerusalem. There were probably things that were a little off. Anyone can spot the problems. It takes an encourager to say, "Here is what I think God may be up to in your life. Don't you see, friend, how God has brought you to the end of your rope right now? How wonderful God is, he's creating dependence in your life. Isn't God good? He never is against us. He's always for us. I hear what you are saying, friend, but let me encourage you. You haven't fallen out of the hand of God. God still wants to use you. God has something for you in this. God is at work."

Barnabas encouraged the fearful. He encouraged the faithful.

Barnabas encouraged future stars

Here is what we read in Acts 11:26:

Acts 11:26 (NIV)

26 and when he found him [Saul], he brought him to Antioch. So for a whole year Barnabas and Saul met with the church and taught great numbers of people. The disciples were called Christians first at Antioch.

Encouragers are always on the lookout for high potential people, who have high ceilings. Often the people are young, but they may be new Christians and they see potential. It was Barnabas who sponsored Saul with the disciples in chapter 9. It was Barnabas who rescued Saul from obscurity in Tarsus. He brings him to Antioch and he promotes him to this role of co-teacher in Antioch.

Encouragers are like talent scouts. Sometimes people are pretty rough when they're young. It takes an encourager to see the diamond in the rough. Other people miss the potential, but an encourager has an eye for future stars.

I imagine that Saul had a lot of rough spots when Barnabas met him. He may have been temperamentally brash. He was certainly aggressive. He may have been too direct. Maybe he hurt people's feelings. Maybe he interrupted folks. Maybe he was too intellectual. But Barnabas must have thought, "My goodness, how God has gifted him. If I work with him, if I don't discourage him, if I'm patient with him, if I give him opportunity, if he hangs around with me one day this guy is going to turn into a superstar."

Lots of churches have huge backdoors where all the future stars flood out because there is no room for them. There is no room for them in worship ministry, in leadership, in teaching, in starting up ministries. One of the things that we as a church can do is make room for others. We don't get to determine how many talents someone has – whether they're a one talent person, two or five or ten. But we can recognize in each other's lives, "Here is someone I think has real potential."

I especially want to speak to small group leaders and ministry leaders here. Look around you and see where there is rising talent and bless it. Release folks. Say to people, "How about if you gave the teaching tonight? How about if you led the ministry time? Why don't you take the lead in teaching the kids or the teens? You lead worship and I will back you up." And if you especially see a star, pass their names along to the pastors. "Hey, here is someone I think has huge potential. They're a future major church leader."

Barnabas encouraged failures

Acts 15:36–39 (NIV)

36 Some time later Paul said to Barnabas, "Let us go back and visit the believers in all the towns where we preached the word of the Lord and see how they are doing." 37 Barnabas wanted to take John, also called Mark, with them, 38 but

Paul did not think it wise to take him, because he had deserted them in Pamphylia and had not continued with them in the work. 39 They had such a sharp disagreement that they parted company. Barnabas took Mark and sailed for Cyprus,

Mark had blown it. He had left Paul and Barnabas at Pamphylia, perhaps due to the stress of ministry life, maybe he had a disagreement, maybe he was homesick. But he took off. But to Paul that showed a character defect that meant that this guy could not be a future leader in the New Testament church. He's too unreliable, Barnabas.

You know, the church is full of people who have failed at something in the past. Maybe they experienced a marriage failure; folks have tried to lead a group that never fired out. We have lots of folks in our church who used to be pastors. And for whatever reason they left the ministry. Encouragers come alongside of failures and say, "God's not done with you. God still has a purpose for you and he didn't put gifts in your life to leave them buried until you die. Don't walk away from God forever. Don't walk away from ministry forever."

I remember an encourager in my life after I lost my first job at a law firm. I got rejection letter after rejection letter from other law firms. I got so discouraged that I actually tore out my whole bathroom and rebuilt it. Anyone who knows me said, "My goodness, you were really depressed," because I hate working on my house. I tore the bathroom out down to the floorboards, tore off all the lath and plaster. I retiled, put in a new sink, put in new drywall, new plumbing, everything.

But an encourager came alongside of me and said, "Rich, you need to get back in the saddle. You're not going to hide in your house doing work on your bathroom. You're going to get out there and look for a job. And I am going to push you and stand with you until God opens up another position for you." And God did.

One of Paul's great teammates was Barnabas. I want to turn quickly for the last few minutes and look at another teammate of Paul whose name was Timothy.

Timothy was a faithful mentee

Now it is not exactly clear when Timothy became a Christian, but it is a reasonable inference from reading the book of Acts and reading Paul's references to Timothy that Timothy became a Christian during Paul's first missionary journey. So Paul was likely the human instrument through which Timothy came to Christ. And so Paul was Timothy's spiritual father. Here is what we read in 2 Timothy 1:2:

2 Timothy 1:2 (NIV)

2 To Timothy, my dear son:

Timothy was a young man when Paul met him. He was probably in his late teens. And he began to accompany Paul on his missionary journeys. Paul began sending Timothy out on his own to Thessalonica, Macedonia, to Corinth and then to Ephesus. It is so important for an older person to bring a younger person along, to mentor them in all of life, in business, in school, and in the faith.

Let me tell you a story. There was a documentary about orphaned African elephants. The documentary followed the plight of 25 orphaned male elephants, which were just entering male adolescence. In other words, they were teenage elephants. And during this period of adolescence, teenage male elephants often become very aggressive. And because there were no older male elephants around, they never got past this adolescent cycle and they were causing a lot of problems.

For example, one time an aggressive teenage male elephant attacked a rhino who was drinking water at a pond. The elephant speared the rhino with his tusks and drove the rhino into the pond where he held him under water and drowned him. Then the teenage elephants began fighting each other. They were bloodied with wounds all over their sides. Simply put, these teenage male elephants did not know how to act as elephants – they became violent and aggressive because they had no fathers.

Do you know what these scientists did? They went to another herd of elephants and got some older male elephants, who had fathered several generations of elephants, and they introduced these older male elephants into the herd of 25 teenage elephants. Do you know what happened? Immediately, the young male elephants calmed down. They learned how to behave themselves. They learned how to act like elephants should act. They changed socially; they changed biochemically. They got out of the cycle of perpetual adolescence.

Timothy did not have a Christian father. We don't know what his relationship with his natural father was like, but we do know that his father was not a Christian. So, through the gospel, Paul became his spiritual father.

How many young men and women need to have an older Christian, a surrogate dad, a surrogate mom, to mentor them in the Christian life? Businesses are discovering that if an individual is going to advance in his career and really be productive for a company, they need mentors. And businesses are discovering that folks don't need just one mentor. One person can't supply everything that a person needs. Folks need a constellation of mentors.

And I would say, brothers and sisters, that all of us need a constellation of mentors, who assist us at different points in our lives. There is a wonderful book that I read about 20 years ago called Connecting: The Mentoring Relationships You Need to Succeed in Life by Paul Stanley and Bobby Clinton.

Book Cover of Connecting: The Mentoring Relationships You Need to Succeed in Life by Paul Stanley and Bobby Clinton.

In the book Stanley and Clinton explore the various kinds of mentors that we need at different points in life. When we start the Christian life we need a discipler.

Discipler

Someone who helps us with the basics of the Christian life, who helps us learn how to feed ourselves from God's Word, who teaches us how to pray, and what the next steps ought to be following our conversion. Sometimes we need a spiritual director.

Spiritual Director

A person who offers us reflection regarding what God is up to in our lives, a person who can hold us accountable, who asks us great questions, and assists us to move to the next level of our spiritual lives. Sometimes we need a:

Coach

A person who provides us with skills training coaching us in how to lead, or how to teach, or how to share our faith. Sometimes we need a:

Counselor

Someone who offers timely advice, helps us when we're stuck regarding issues about ourselves, about our relationships, and about our circumstances. Sometimes we need a:

Sponsor

A person who will promote us in an organization, or promote us in church.

If you've experienced any maturity in your Christian life; if you are a person who has a generally healthy marriage, you've gone down the road a piece in business, in faith, have you ever asked the Lord, "Lord, who would you like me to mentor?" None of us can be everything that another person needs. But have you ever asked, "Lord, who can I disciple? Who can I coach? Who can I counsel? Who can I teach or sponsor or direct."

Timothy became one of Paul's most trusted colleagues through Paul's mentoring. The Kingdom was significantly advanced through Barnabas' encouragement. We need to be part of a team because we can't do the job alone. Let's pray.

The Team of a Leader

Rich Nathan

June 8, 2014

Strength in Weakness: Leadership Lessons from the Life of Paul
Ecclesiastes 4:9-12

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