



# HAZARDOUS SAINTS

**Christians Risking All, Changing Everything**

The Rev. C. K. Robertson, Ph.D.

Study Guide



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*To Bishop Jon Bruno,  
a faithful teacher,  
mentor,  
and friend to me and to so many.*



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# INTRODUCTION

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Welcome!

And, I should immediately add, *WARNING*...because following Jesus—really following Jesus—is not a journey for the faint of heart!

Jesus himself told the first wave of would-be followers to consider carefully what they claimed they were ready to do. He challenged them to count the cost. “Any who would come after me must deny themselves, take up their cross, and follow me.” It is far easier to give lip service to the idea, go to church once a week, and not allow what we say we believe to penetrate our very being and transform all that we say and do and even think. To be serious about it, to truly follow Jesus is indeed an adventure, and a risky one at that.

This study guide accompanies a DVD course on six heroes of the faith who exemplify what it means to say “Yes” to Jesus. Most of their names are familiar, but their stories may not be. Whether you are working through this study on your own, as part of a small group, or within the context of your vestry or congregational leadership team, these resources are intended to inspire and equip, that you might live more intentionally into your own calling as ambassadors of Christ, and take your place besides these marvelous, hazardous saints.

# HOW TO USE THE DVD AND STUDY GUIDE

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- 1) Open with prayer. Whether on your own or in a group, at the beginning of each session you can open with prayer, perhaps using the following:

*Gracious God, thank you for all the saints who faithfully served you in times past. Now, we pray, so draw our hearts to you, so guide our minds, so fill our imaginations, so control our wills, that we, like they, may be wholly yours, utterly dedicated to you; and then use us, we pray, as you will, and always to your glory and the welfare of your people; through our Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.*

- 2) If in a group, take a few minutes for “check-in.” Participants should briefly (1-2 minutes) share how they are doing or what they have learned in the past week. It is helpful to designate a person in the group to serve as a timekeeper.
- 3) Insert the DVD and follow the on-screen instructions.
- 4) After listening to the presentation, turn to the accompanying section of this study guide. Each section includes the following:
  - an introductory page on that particular “hazardous saint”
  - a timeline page, with key events in that person’s life and their impact today
  - a scripture page, with suggested passages related to that person
  - questions and discussion starters building on what is said on the DVD
  - exercises that can further deepen and broaden our own ministries
  - a blank page for your own notes and reflections
- 5) At the end of this guide are recommendations for further study.



## A WORD ABOUT THIS PROGRAM

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This series grows out of seminary class I taught at The General Theological Seminary, where I have had the privilege of serving as a Distinguished Visiting Professor for several years. That course, in turn, along with various weekend presentations I have facilitated in various dioceses throughout the Church, coincided with the publication of a book from SkyLight Paths entitled *“A Dangerous Dozen: 12 Christians Who Threatened the Status Quo But Taught Us to Live like Jesus* (2012). This series is intended to complement that earlier work.

Some of the suggested biblical readings come from The Episcopal Church’s officially approved publication, *Holy Women, Holy Men* (NY: Church Publishing, 2012). All biblical quotations are from the *New Revised Standard Version* (National Council of Churches USA, 1989).



# Barnabas: The Subversive Bridgebuilder

(according to tradition, died June 11, 61 AD)

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**H**is name was Joseph, of the venerable tribe of Levi, but unlike Peter and the apostles, he was an **outsider** to Jerusalem. A native of the island of Cyprus in the Mediterranean, he was not a Palestinian Jew but a **Hellenist** whose likely first spoken language was Greek, not Aramaic, and who read the scriptures in the Greek translation known as the *Septuagint*, not in the original Hebrew.

Joseph was a person of some means, owning land that he was able to sell, and then, like other followers of Jesus in those earliest days, he **generously** gave the proceeds to the apostles for distribution among the needy in their community. But unlike other followers, he stood out as a relational **bridgebuilder** and **wise leader**. The apostles soon gave Joseph of Cyprus a new name by which he would become forever known: *Barnabas, the son of encouragement*.

What is truly remarkable about Barnabas is not that he was an **encourager**, but rather that even as he was recognized as an encourager, he was at the same time able—through his encouraging ways—to **subvert the accepted system in radical ways**. He did this first by vouching for Saul/Paul when the apostles wanted nothing to do with the troublemaker, then supported the proselytizing of Gentile converts by the believers in Antioch. That community of believers gained a new name and identity: *Christians*. He **took Saul/Paul under his wing** and apprenticed him there before the two of them were sent forth from Antioch as a new breed of apostles, carrying with them a “sacred bundle” both consistent with, and different from, that which they inherited from the church in Jerusalem.



Barnabas was indeed an encourager. But make no mistake: this encourager subversively transformed a small Jewish sect into something altogether new.

## TIMELINE

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- △ Introduced as a Hellenist, landowning Jew living in Jerusalem who gives at the apostles' feet and is acknowledged as an encourager.
- △ Vouched for controversial convert, Saul of Tarsus, before the apostles.
- △ Sent by apostles to inspect new advances in Antioch and recruited Saul to assist in the leadership work there.
- △ Following a time of prayer and fasting by the leadership team in Antioch, sent forth with Saul as ambassadors and apostles.
- △ Takes a secondary role as Saul/Paul becomes the primary spokesperson.
- △ Helps establish Christian communities in various cities.
- △ Experiences a conflict with Paul that results in a split.

## IMPACT

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- △ Tradition reports Barnabas' returning to Cyprus, where he would become known after his death as its patron saint.
- △ An epistle written sometime in the 2nd century is named for Barnabas.
- △ Not only Christians, but many Muslims also honor Barnabas as a hero of faith.
- △ Forever known for his generosity, Barnabas is often pictured with his hand outstretched and open to give money.
- △ Renewed interest in the Acts of the Apostles has sparked a focus on Barnabas as a model for supportive, encouraging leadership.

## SCRIPTURE READINGS

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### Isaiah 42:5-12

I have given you as a covenant to the people,  
a light to the nations,  
to open the eyes that are blind,  
to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon,  
from the prison those who sit in darkness (vv. 6b-7).

See, the former things have come to pass,  
and new things I now declare;  
before they spring forth,  
I tell you of them (v. 9).

### Psalm 112

It is well with those who deal generously and lend,  
who conduct their affairs with justice (v. 5).

### Acts 11:19-30; 13:1-3

Then Barnabas went to Tarsus to look for Saul, and when he had found him, he brought him to Antioch. So it was that for an entire year they met with the church and taught a great many people, and it was in Antioch that the disciples were first called "Christians" (vv. 25-26).

### Matthew 10:7-16

"See, I am sending you out like sheep into the midst of wolves; so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves" (v. 16).

## DISCUSSION STARTERS

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1

Joseph of Cyprus was given the nickname of *Barnabas*, “encourager.” Simon became *Peter*, “the rock.” James and John were called *sons of thunder*. What nickname/descriptor do you think others might apply to you?

2

The leaders of the Jerusalem community had a negative first impression of Saul/Paul, which Barnabas had to counter. When have you been wrong in your opinion about someone? How does your church respond to newcomers?

3

What do you think about the church in Antioch commissioning its *own* set of “sent ones?” Should they have consulted instead with the Twelve, and perhaps had Jerusalem send out a delegation on their behalf?

4

The shift in Acts from *Barnabas and Saul* to *Paul and Barnabas* marks a change in the relationship between the former mentor and apprentice. What do you imagine this was like for Barnabas? When have you experienced something like this? What was that like?

5

In Galatians, Paul speaks of the conflict he had with Peter because the latter turned his back on uncircumcised Gentile converts when advisors from the “home office” came to check up on things. “Even Barnabas,” Paul says—even the encourager—followed Peter in this hurtful hypocrisy. Perhaps this contributed to their eventual split. Consider any possible parallels today, either in your own experience or in a situation you have heard about. Why do otherwise faithful persons (and include yourself here) sometimes go along with others, even when they are in the wrong?

## EXERCISES AND ACTIVITIES

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1

Consider your congregation's "sacred bundle," what it was in years past and how it has evolved into what it is now. What is in the bundle today? Name a few essential identity- and mission-markers that you think would be included in the bundle, and then discuss what might be added—or changed—in order to live out God's calling more profoundly in years to come.

2

Acts depicts Barnabas as part of a generous community that was faithful and wise in the distribution of funds. Take a look at your congregation's budget—as well as its programs and use of facilities throughout the week—and see how these match up with what you say are the priorities in the church's sacred bundle. Where there are discrepancies, what steps can be taken to align what we *actually do* with what we *say we are about*?

3

Barnabas recruited the newcomer Saul/Paul and apprenticed him. On one side of a piece of paper, outline all the things your congregation does well in recruiting and retaining newcomers. On the other side, write down your congregation's weak spots when it comes to newcomer inclusion. How could you improve? Before you meet next week as a group, take a "field trip" through your church as if you were a newcomer. Start with the church website, prints ads, and church answering-machine recording: Do these give you as a newcomer the information you need to find the church and to want to find it? Then, when you attend church that week, look at everything on site through a newcomer's eyes: Are there "First-Time Visitor" parking spots? directional markers? clear signage? Is there a nursery, and would new parents feel good about bringing their toddlers there? Are there programs for teens that they would find engaging? Does the service itself make a newcomer feel included...or like an outsider looking in? When your group next meets, share your insights.

