

New Friend Request: Session 3 Devotional

ONLY HUMAN

By Sarah Anderson

(Read Acts 15:36-40 before reading this devotional.)

Have you ever been really good friends with someone, maybe even best friends? Maybe this friendship was rooted in similar interests or personalities, or common goals in life. You and this person were as close as two friends could possibly be. But then, one day, out of nowhere, you get in a disagreement. It started as a simple difference in opinion, but it didn't take long before things got heated. What started out as a simple preference over something became much bigger, something where your convictions were involved. Before too long, it became obvious. No one was going to budge. And a simple argument, a simple tiff became the thing that undid your whole friendship. Years lost, experiences overlooked, memories forgotten, none of it mattered anymore. The friendship you thought had the longevity to last a lifetime is brought to an abrupt end.

I have been there before. Have you? Would it surprise you to hear that even the apostle Paul has been there? Is that weird for you to think that the apostle Paul, who wrote most of the New Testament Bible, was in such a sharp conflict with someone, that the friendship was ended over it? It surprises me. In fact, I remember the first time I read the story in Acts that told what happened between Paul and Barnabas. I remember furiously skipping ahead in the book to see where the reconciliation was, to see when one of them finally swallowed their pride, got over themselves and made things right between them. But I couldn't find that story. I couldn't find the verses that told me it all worked out in the end.

As far as we know when Barnabas and Paul parted ways in Acts 15 that was the end. Things never quite got back to how they were before. Maybe harsh words had been said that could not be overlooked, maybe demeaning comments had been made that could not be forgotten. Whatever happened, it was big enough, shocking enough, far reaching enough that a deep, profound and personal friendship could not survive the fallout.

The story of Paul and Barnabas is like a black stain on the reputation of one of the most noted Christian missionaries in all time. It reminds me of Paul's humanity, but honestly, I am not sure I want the reminder. I would rather think of Paul as perfect than read about what seemed like a petty disagreement that caused friends to part ways. And the fact that Acts stays relatively quiet about what happens later kind of annoys me. Were they sorry? Did they regret what happened? If they had to do it all over again, would they?

I think they would. And while Acts doesn't dish on the weeks, months and years that follow the split between Paul and Barnabas, Paul himself has so much to say about relationships, that I can't help but think he was speaking from some experience.

Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs . . . It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres (1 Corinthians 13:4-5, 7 NIV).

Get rid of all bitterness, rage, and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice. Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you (Ephesians 4:31-32 NIV).

Make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and purpose. Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than

yourselves. Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others (Philippians 2:2-4 NIV).

These sound like the words of a man who has been broken, a man who has tried to navigate the tumultuous waters of relationships and friendships, and undoubtedly failed from time to time. These sound like the words of a man who can only speak as wise and as confidently as he does because of the mistakes he made in the past. Read these verses again and see if you can't hear a hint of regret, a taste of remorse, a sense of, if only I could go back. Paul never claimed to be perfect. He knew he was human, just like all of us know we are—and as a result, he knew he was prone to failure and making mistakes that came back to haunt him. Paul's story is no different than ours, except we get a front row seat to the drama in his relationships that all of history doesn't get to see in ours.

The truth is, when it comes to our friendships and our relationships, we are going to have conflict. We will have disagreements, and sometimes because of our pride, because of our stubborn nature, conflict not handled well and disagreements not treated rightly will result in the end of a relationship. But you and I both know, and Paul knows, that when a friendship ends the story doesn't end there. There is a lot of time for wondering why it had to go the way it did, what would happen if you could do it all over again, a lot of regret.

When we read the letters of Paul, when we hear the words communicated about relationships, about how to treat other people, about how to love as Christ would have us love, the significance of his words become a lot clearer once we understand the history of the man who penned the words to begin with. Paul lost a good friend, a companion, a partner, and he didn't forget it; not when he wrote to the churches years later, not when he taught them how to move beyond a disagreement, not when communicated the hard to swallow words about loving a friend, no matter what the cost.

Have you ever lost a friendship? Have you ever truly gotten over the wounds it leaves? Paul doesn't seem to have. And I think if he had his way, he wouldn't have us get over it either. He would want us to learn from our mistakes, from our missteps when it comes to our friendships, and then, and this is the most important part, change because of them. Learn from them. Fix our behavior and our actions so it doesn't happen again; or as Paul himself would say, be patient, persevere, and love them through it. Be compassionate, forgive, and think of everyone as better than you.

We may not be able to change the relationship failures we have caused in the past. But we can learn not to repeat them—to become people who forgive so quickly, who love so completely, who persevere so thoroughly that our present and our future relationships are reshaped and remolded to look like Jesus would want them to.

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