

Gospel Triumph: We All Need Encouragement – Acts 20:1-12

I'll never forget a meeting I had with a professor during my sophomore year in college. I was struggling quite a bit that year emotionally and my closest friends could tell. I was specifically very burdened by the belief that I couldn't seem to do enough to maintain a good standing with God to enjoy communion with Him. I woke up every day terrified that I would sin or that I had sinned and that God was frustrated with me and I was out of fellowship with Him.

My good friend was a senior and he was trying to help me with this and so he set up a meeting with one of our favorite professors who taught biblical counseling. I'd had this professor in class but didn't know him on a personal level. I went to his office one afternoon and tried to explain my fear and frustration with my inability to stay in a good standing with God. I cried and blubbered and when I finished, he simply said, "Nathan, can you open this Bible to Ephesians 1 and just start reading." *"Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him. In love."* And I kept reading.

When I finished, he said, this is how God feels about you and what His perspective on you is. This is true of you right now as you sit here. I walked out of his office and felt like a 500 pound backpack had fallen off my back. What had happened? I had received encouragement from this professor.

Now, it doesn't take a Phd in counseling or Bible or anything else to give encouragement. It simply took this fellow believer applying the gospel to my situation in a clear way that turned my attention to Christ and His work and strengthened my emotional and spiritual resolve to continue on. This is encouragement and we all need it. It's an absolutely necessary ingredient in the life of the church and it defines the progress of the gospel at the beginning of Acts 20. So, in Acts 20:1-12 today we will see 3 Ground Rules for the Ministry of Encouragement.

1. We Need Encouragement because Challenges Come (vv. 1-3)

Paul arrived in Ephesus at the beginning of Acts 19 and ended up spending over two years there. Listen to Acts 19:10. His time in Ephesus comes to an end when the silver idol makers in the city cause a major riot against Paul and the Christians and in order to defend their goddess, Artemis. The threat level was pretty high at this point and so Paul leaves Ephesus after all this time. But notice what he does before he leaves. Acts 20:1.

These Christians are clearly in a tough situation. There's major tension with others in the city, the threat of government involvement is there, and Paul, their leader and the founder of the church in Ephesus is about to depart. What do they need? Encouragement. And that's exactly what Paul gives before he departs.

After encouraging the disciples, he does leave and travels to Macedonia. Let me remind you of what churches are in Macedonia. You can trace the red outbound line here to Philippi, Thessalonica, and Berea. Notice what Paul does when he arrives in each of these locations. He gives encouragement.

This is a regular practice of his ministry. We've seen him revisit churches he planted and strengthen them, but this particular section really focuses on the encouragement he gives. In fact, notice how our passage for today ends in verse 12. This word translated "comforted" is the same Greek word translated "encouraging" and "encouragement" in verses 1-2. Book ends of encouragement with everything in the middle driven by encouragement.

Let's talk about this idea of encouragement and what this involves because the biblical idea is different from what our culture means by encouragement. Typically, in our day and age, encouragement involves building up self-confidence. We think of encouragement as a kind word that makes a person feel better, more confident and more capable. "You can do this", "You are a boss", "Trust your preparation", or something along those lines. More often than not, encouragement is focused on your ability and capability and trying to get you to realize your potential.

Biblically speaking, encouragement isn't focused on your ability or capability to make something happen or to be successful. It may speak to your gifting, but the

driving factor behind biblical encouragement is God's work in gifting you and God's work in redeeming you through Christ. The focus on the external reality of God's power, love, grace, provision, gifting, and providence is what ultimately builds you up and gives you the confidence to move forward.

The word behind this is used all over the NT to speak of ministry to others within in the body of Christ. Acts 11:23; 1 Thess. 3:2. Some have the gift of encouragement, Romans 12:8, but every believer is supposed to be an encourager. 2 Cor. 13:11.

There's a difference between rebuke and encouragement. Think of encouragement as strong exhortation, the offer of comfort and the pressing positively of a person to continue, to keep going, and to persevere. 1 Tim. 5:1.

Encouragement is always tied to a reason, and the reason is not found by looking inward to my own resources. Encouragement comes from the grace and love of God. It comes as we accept the biblical picture of God's kindness to us and His providential care for us.

Another word for this practice within the community of believers is affirmation. Affirmation must be directed toward the character of God and work of God reflected in a person. You can encourage someone by offering affirmation.

Here's the thing about affirmation. It's so powerful. When someone gives you a word of affirmation and encouragement it is like refreshing cold water on a scorching hot day. It's life giving. It's influential.

Can I just give you two practical bits of advice for offering affirmation and encouragement? Make it specific. Saying, "You are a good person" is far different from saying, "I noticed you exercise patience in your parenting at small group the other day and it's clear to me that God is at work in you. Thank you for your good example." But being specific requires you to pay attention to evidences of grace in those around you. You have to watch for God's work. So, make it specific and then, make it plentiful. Do not get stingy with affirmation of others. Can you imagine what it would be like to be a part of a church where affirmation flowed freely

among members? Where encouragement was the culture and not criticism? That sounds like a culture rooted in grace.

Now, why do we need encouragement and affirmation? Because life is filled with challenges. The believers in Ephesus experienced difficulty along with those in Macedonia. Then notice what happens in verse 3. Paul can't even stay in Asia very long and can't even travel back to Antioch as he had planned. He's forced to go back through Macedonia. Challenges abound. Life is difficult. Grace is needed and grace is most clearly displayed as encouragement one to another.

2. We Give and Receive Encouragement in the Community of Christ (vv. 4-6)

This second ground rule is found in every verse of this section. The whole section is about Paul's ministry to believers and the encouragement that comes through the church. But these verses specifically mention Paul's companions by name from a variety of churches that each are also involved in this ministry of encouragement. Let's read verses 4-5. Paul's group heads to Troas and Paul and Luke, who was apparently staying at Philippi for quite a while rejoins Paul and then they head to Troas as well.

I asked a moment ago how amazing it would be to be a part of a church driven by encouragement. This is what these companions of Paul saw and experienced and then took with them. And this is what it's supposed to be like. Listen to Colossians 2:2. 1 Thess. 5:11. Phil. 2:1-2.

3. We Draw Encouragement from Truth & Power (vv. 7-12)

Verse 6 ends with Paul in Troas. He's been here before, but wasn't able to stay very long the first time. This is the city where he had the vision of the man in Macedonia asking for help. Listen to Acts 16:8-10.

Now he stays for a week and no doubt was seeking to encourage the disciples who are there. The last night he's there was the first day of the week, Sunday. This is part of the reason Christians worship on Sunday now. It's to celebrate the resurrection each week and there's precedent for it in Acts. But regardless. Look what happens. Verse 7. Paul knows he will be leaving the next day and this has a feeling of finality to it. All of these visits do because of Acts 19:21, which outlines

Paul's travel plans. And what does Paul spend his last evening with them doing? Speaking the word. He knows this is what they need and so he speaks late into the evening. And it's here at Troas that we give one of the most unique and surprising little stories in the NT. Look at verses 8-9.

I think all of us have been able to sympathize with Eutychus at some point. I went to a Christian college, and we had a lot of chapel services, bible conference services, and other gatherings where someone would speak, sometimes for quite a while. I distinctly remember one Sunday afternoon meeting where the lights were dimmed, and we'd already been to church that morning. The drowsiness was simply too much to bear. I learned to rest my chin on my chest and fall asleep while sitting up so I wouldn't get caught sleeping.

I don't blame Eutychus for getting drowsy, but I think I am going to ask him in heaven about his decision to sit in an open third story window. Paul takes immediate action. Verse 10. God's power demonstrated in bringing life out of death and this is a very vivid picture of what encouragement does in our lives. Look at verse 11. Paul continued to unfold God's truth and apply it specifically to their lives and the result is given in verse 12.

Their comfort or encouragement is both from the words Paul spoke and the demonstration of God's power in raising Eutychus. And I think we are supposed to read Paul's words and actions together here. Biblical encouragement brings death out of life because it draws on the same power of God that raises the dead. Listen to Romans 8:11.

And it's this power that is at work in you and in me and it's this power that we offer to others through biblical affirmation and encouragement.

So, how can we grow in this practice of encouragement to others? First, immerse yourself in God's grace. There's nothing like awareness of the undeserved kindness you have been shown to help you look for grace in others. Second, pay attention to others and God's work in them and third, humbly open your mouth once this week and specifically offer affirmation and encouragement to someone and watch what happens. Let's pray.

Sermon Reflection Questions – 9/7/25

- Talk about a time in your life when you received genuine encouragement.
- What are some common challenges that believers face today that put us in need of encouragement?
- How is the biblical idea of encouragement different from the way we typically think of encouragement in our culture?
- Why does it ultimately not help long term to attempt to encourage someone by focusing on their ability or capability?
- Explain how affirmation is similar to encouragement.
- Why is it important to offer specific encouragement rather than general encouragement?
- Give an example of specific encouragement.
- Specific encouragement requires paying attention to other believers. How can you grow in this ability?
- What hinders us from paying attention to other believers?

- Describe what it would look like to have a church defined by a culture of encouragement rather than a culture of criticism.
- Why must encouragement be based on truth?
- Whose one person you can give specific encouragement to this week?