

“DEFEATING DISCOURAGEMENT” (Acts 11:19-24)

There is a famous legend that the devil once held an auction to sell his tools, which included: malice, hatred, envy, jealousy, sensuality, and deceit. Amongst the collection was a harmless-looking wedge-shaped tool, much worn and priced higher than any of them. An onlooker asked the Devil what it was. “That’s discouragement,” was his reply. “Well, why do you have it priced so high?” The Devil replied, “Because it is more useful to me than any of the others. I can pry open and get inside a man’s consciousness with that when I could not get near him with any of the others, and when once inside I can use him in whatever way suits me best. It is so much worn because I use it with nearly everybody, as very few people yet know it belongs to me.”



The world that we live in is a discouraging place. That is one of the by-products of the Fall. For it is a place that is corrupted by sin and destined for decline and ultimate destruction. To discourage a person is seemingly always easier for us than to encourage him or her. One of the ironies of human nature is that we tend to be less encouraging to those who are closest to us and much more encouraging and generous to those who aren't.

Even in the church there are people who seem to have the *gift of discouragement*. They appoint themselves as snipers for the Lord! Such people can spot the fly in every ointment! If we are honest, we are often such a person. That ought not to be the case. The Lord Jesus does not want us to be discouraged. Before the darkest hour of His death, he encouraged His disciples, “*Let not your hearts be troubled.*” (John 14:1) In Romans 12:8 encouragement or exhortation is listed as one of the gifts given to the body of Christ, “*Or be that exhorteth, on exhortation....*” The word translated “*exhorteth*” here is *parakaleo* (from *para* = side of, alongside, beside and *kaleo* = to call) means literally to call one alongside. It has the idea of giving help or to urge someone to take some action. We need many more believers to come alongside others and be encouragers. Maybe that’s a gift we should all pray for!

Words can build up or destroy lives. Death and life are in the power of the tongue, “*The tongue of the wise useth knowledge aright: but the mouth of fools poureth out foolishness.*” (Proverbs 15:2) Wisdom is often better expressed in silence than words. A woman once came to John Wesley and said she knew what her talent was and she said, “I think my talent from God is to speak my mind.” Wesley replied, “I don’t think God would mind if you buried that talent.” In the NT Church believers are urged, “*And let us consider one another to provoke unto love and to good works*” (Hebrews

10:24) This word “*provoke*” has the idea of arousing or encouraging our fellow Christians to do works of love and goodness. Spurgeon commented on this, “I do not know how we can do that better than by being very loving and very full of good works ourselves, for then will others be likely to say, “If these people are helped by God’s grace to love like this, and to labour like this, why should not we do the same” A good example is often better than a very proper precept.”

THE DISCOURAGERS

The Bible is replete with examples of both believers and unbelievers seeking to discourage the people of God.

DAVID & ELIAB – In 1 Samuel 17 we have the great confrontation between David and Goliath. But before David could fight the physical giant he had to fight the giants of discouragement and intemperance. The test of discouragement came from his older brother, Eliab who falsely accused him of wrong motives in coming to the battlefield, “*and Eliab’s anger was kindled against David, and he said, Why comest thou down hither? and with whom hast thou left those few sheep in the wilderness? I know thy pride, and the naughtiness of thine heart; for thou art come down that thou mightest see the battle.*” (1 Samuel 17:28b)



Eliab means “Jehovah is my Father” but he does not live up to his name here. Everything he said to try and knock David down was untrue. Often the greatest discouragements come to us from those closest to us when we want to stand for God. As AW Pink observed,

“Fellow-servant of God, your sphere may be an humble and inconspicuous one; the flock to which God has called you to minister may be a small one; but *faithfulness* to your trust is what is required of you. There may be an Eliab ready to taunt you, and speak contemptuously of “those *few* sheep in the wilderness” (1 Sam. 17:28), as there was for David to encounter; but regard not their sneers. It is written, “His lord said unto him, Well done, thou good and faithful servant: thou hast been faithful over a few things, I will make thee ruler over many things; enter thou into the joy of thy Lord” (Matthew 25:21).”

This was a bitter blow from Eliab to this young man seeking to honour the Lord’s name. Eliab was keen to fight his young brother but he would not raise a finger himself against the real enemy

Goliath! Ironically, Eliab accuses him of having a wicked heart when God selected David for being a man after God's own heart. Clearly, Eliab has no discernment as well as courage. Wisely, David refuses to be drawn into a confrontation with his brother. He simply replied, "*What have I now done? Is there not a cause?*" (1 Samuel 17:29) David demonstrated another quality here of meekness and restraint amidst great provocation. He had to conquer himself before he could conquer the giant. David may have been hurt by this attack but he will not allow it to hinder him seeking God's glory in the conflict with the Philistine. As Spurgeon put it leaders need to have, "one blind eye and one deaf ear."



NAOMI & RUTH – Naomi was brought up among the people of God in Israel. She and her family made the wrong choice to move to Moab. After the bitterness of the loss of her husband and sons, Naomi decides to go home. Her two daughter in laws indicated that they also wished to return with her to the Holy Land. But Naomi sought to discourage them,

And Naomi said unto her two daughters in law, Go, return each to her mother's house: the LORD deal kindly with you, as ye have dealt with the dead, and with me. The LORD grant you that ye may find rest, each of you in the house of her husband. Then she kissed them; and they lifted up their voice, and wept. (Ruth 1:8-9a)

Naomi unilaterally decided that it would be for the better for her daughters-in-law to go back to Moab. There is no mention of prayer or seeking guidance from the Lord for this decision. She does not attempt to witness to them about positive reasons for coming to Bethlehem and seeking the God of Israel as their God. Ultimately, it seems that in these exchanges she has no real concern for their souls. When Ruth refused to follow Orpah and return to Moab, Naomi is even more discouraging to Ruth, "*And she said, Behold, thy sister-in-law is gone back unto her people, and unto her gods: return thou after thy sister-in-law.*" (Ruth 1:15). This is the third time Naomi effectively commands Ruth to return to her people! Such a statement reveals the backslidden state of Naomi. She was fully cognisant that sending these two young women back to Moab was effectively a spiritual death sentence.

Ruth, by contrast, must be seen in a different light. She is in the midst of a great spiritual struggle in her mind with a number of opportunities to return back. Four times she has been encouraged to do so by words and circumstances (v7, v8, v11, v15). Temptation is especially difficult to resist when it comes repeatedly and from the lips of one you love and respect. The last

temptation was the strongest, as it came immediately after Orpah's example. Peer pressure by your contemporaries is especially hard to resist. But Ruth refused to buckle under the discouragements of Naomi. She was determined to go to the Holy Land and join the people of God. Even after they arrived and prospects were limited and Naomi was cold and indifferent, Ruth refused to give up. She arose and went to glean in the fields trusting God to take care of them both. Trials and discouragements will either make you or break you! Orpah gave up, Naomi became bitter but Ruth grew closer. Which one are you?

HANNAH & ELI – We find another example of discouragement in the story of Hannah. She was a woman who had much to discourage her in serving the Lord. Her husband was a bigamist and a weak, insensitive man. She was taunted at home repeatedly by her rival Peninnah. And her greatest burden to carry was her barrenness. Every day Hannah ran into the evidence in the home of Peninnah's gain and her loss. It was a pain like a toothache that never seemed to heal. She could also have become bitter with God and blamed Him for her terrible state. She knew not to judge God's goodness and grace on the basis of her external circumstances at that moment. Hannah was no fair weather believer. Her barrenness and brokenness drove her to God and forced her to look to Him for her hope and help!



In the midst of her anguish, the High Priest who should have been encouraging her was doing the very opposite, "*And Eli said unto her, How long wilt thou be drunken? put away thy wine from thee.*" (1 Samuel 1:14) But even when Eli made the terrible accusation that she was drunken in her prayer, she does not hit back in anger. She respectfully rebuffs his claim with a gracious response, "*And Hannah answered and said, No, my lord, I am a woman of a sorrowful spirit: I have drunk neither wine nor strong drink, but have poured out my soul before the LORD.*" (1 Samuel 1:14) Like most backslidden believers, Eli is quick to jump to conclusions about others on little evidence but not so quick to deal with his own sons who were openly doing much worse! When you serve the Lord with your whole heart expect carnal people to misunderstand you and even criticize you.

THE ENCOURAGERS

There is no reason why believers must seek to discourage one another. Many choose to be encouragers rather than discouragers. One of the heroes of the NT church that is held up as a wonderful example of encouragement is Barnabas.

BARNABAS THE SON OF ENCOURAGEMENT - We are first introduced to him in Acts 4. Barnabas was a man with a holy heartbeat. Some have termed him the unsung hero of the NT Church. He was a wealthy man and sold land and laid the money at the Apostles' feet to help those in need. He set the example and tone for others to follow.

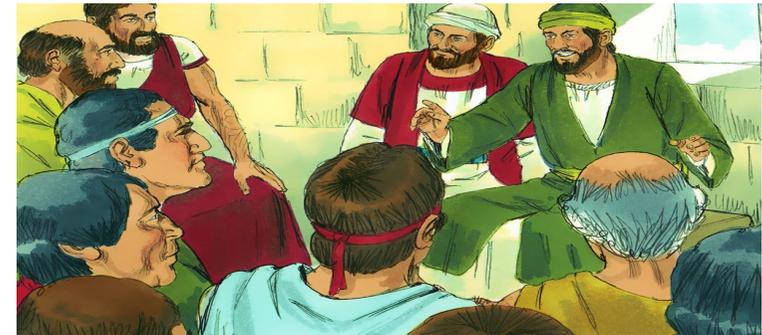
ACTS 9 - When Saul of Tarsus was wonderfully converted on the Road to Damascus many in the NT Church were still afraid of him, *“And when Saul was come to Jerusalem, he assayed to join himself to the disciples: but they were all afraid of him, and believed not that he was a disciple.”* (Acts 9:26) When Saul entered Jerusalem he *“assayed”* or *“kept trying”* to join himself to the disciples – this verb is in the imperfect indicating he continuously tried to be received into their fellowship. They probably thought he was a wolf in sheep's clothing. It must have hurt this young convert to be cut off from God's people. In the midst of this rejection, one man stood up to bridge the gap of suspicion and fear, *But Barnabas took him, and brought him to the apostles, and declared unto them how he had seen the Lord in the way, and that he had spoken to him, and how he had preached boldly at Damascus in the name of Jesus.”* (Acts 9:27) Barnabas truly lived up to his name as *“son of encouragement.”* Steve Cole notes,

“All too often, older Christians are quick to criticize younger believers, treating them as if they should act like mature believers. Rather than welcoming them onto the team, they are quick to point out how immature and inexperienced they are. Sometimes the older saints are threatened by the zeal of the younger saints. But we ought to learn from Barnabas to err on the side of acceptance and encouragement. If the younger believer needs to have some rough edges smoothed out, the Lord will take care of that over time.”

ACTS 11 – In this chapter there was a great move of God in saving souls in Antioch. Many Gentiles were saved. The predominantly Jewish church in Jerusalem heard of this revival, *“Then tidings of these things came unto the ears of the church which was in Jerusalem.”* (Acts 11:22a) The leadership wanted to verify the facts carefully but they also wanted to encourage the growth of these converts. So, they carefully selected one of their choicest servants to head up to Antioch, *“and they sent forth Barnabas, that he should go as far as Antioch.”* (Acts 11:22b) Barnabas was a native of Cyprus and had a gracious character and so was providentially equipped for the work on which the Jerusalem church sent him. Barnabas was known for his empathy to outsiders and humbly yielded to the call of God. The church in Jerusalem chose well when they picked Barnabas as effectively the first pastor of these new converts. This journey from Jerusalem to Antioch was around 300 miles so this was a man with a big heart for these needy souls.

We read that he had a dramatic impact, *“Who, when he came, and had seen the grace of God, was glad, and exhorted them all, that with purpose of heart they would cleave unto the Lord.”* (Acts 11:23) Barnabas was happy because of what God had done by saving grace. His first reaction was not to show his authority or rebuke them but he gave positive encouragement. He was able to discern the grace of God in the imperfect lives of these young Gentile saints. Barnabas truly cared for them and he continued to edify these believers. This word *“exhorted”* means that he continually encouraged them as the imperfect verb signifies a continuous action. George Herbert, an English pastor and poet, said, *“Good words are worth much, and cost little.”* The expression *“that with purpose of heart they would cleave unto the Lord”* has the idea that they must resolve to have a set plan. Christianity cannot be sustained by mere emotion but a determination of the will that they will walk in the ways of God. Those who build their spirituality on mere emotion by singing and rejoicing with

others will soon discover that this type of emotional foundation comes and goes when the emotions rise and fall.



The results of having the right type of godly leader there was *“much people was added unto the Lord.”* What a testimony to this man. This godly man always saw the best in others and wanted the best for them. Barnabas had the right spiritual attitudes, qualities, and gifts truly was a loving and encouraging person. He was *“a good man, and full of the Holy Ghost and of faith.”* The fullness of the Holy Spirit and faith is the root or source of Barnabas' goodness. Faith not only discerns saving grace, it delights in grace. Barnabas' presence and ministry resulted in many more conversions to the Lord. God can really use a man like this. All our churches need to have men and women with the heart of Barnabas.

JONATHAN – King David had many discouraging moments in his life. But God sent His choicest servants to encourage him especially when he was at his wits end. The Bible records of one great act of encouragement when David was betrayed by the men of Keilah, *“And Jonathan Saul's son arose, and went to David into the wood, and strengthened his hand in God. And he said unto him, Fear not: for the band of Saul my father shall not find thee; and thou shalt be king over Israel, and I shall be next unto thee; and that also Saul my father knoweth.”* (1 Samuel 23:16-17) On another occasions when David was driven from the throne by Absalom and Ahithophel, the Lord raised up friends like Ittai a Gittite, Zadok and the priests, Hushai, and later men like Shobi the Ammonite, Barzillai the Gileadite (2 Samuel 15, 17) to encourage the heart of David.

OTHERS - There are many other examples. Joshua and Caleb encouraged the Jews to reject fear and enter the Promised Land, Ezra and Nehemiah encouraged each other, Deborah encouraged Barak, and Haggai and Zechariah encouraged the people to complete the work in Jerusalem. The Apostle Paul was a great encourager of those he ministered amongst. One of his great statements of encouragement to persevere on was to the Corinthian church. He urged them that God would not forget their labours, *“Therefore, my beloved brethren, be ye steadfast, unmoveable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, forasmuch as ye know that your labour is not in vain in the Lord.”* (1 Cor. 15:58)

CONCLUSION

It is all too easy to give up. If you want to give up today, the devil will give you 1000 reasons why you should do so! He will tempt you to: Give up on your relationships changing; Give up on resisting temptation; Give up praying for your unsaved relatives; Give up serving the Lord. Noah was called by God to build an Ark when he was around 500 years old. For 120 years he laboured building that boat when the whole world laughed at him. At the end of that enormous labour only a tiny handful agreed to get into the Ark. I am sure he was tempted to give up.

The Apostle Paul for over 20 years travelled thousands of miles by foot around the Roman Empire. He was beaten, abused, slandered outside the church by the Jews and Romans. Inside the church he was slandered and criticized. Even some of the other apostles and fellow Jewish believers were sceptical of him and misunderstood him. His best friend Barnabas fell out with him and left him. Eventually he found himself languishing in a Roman jail and all the churches in Asia Minor turned against him. I am sure there were many times he felt like giving up but he didn't! If you're going through tough times right now, then these words by the Apostle Paul are for you: *"For which cause we faint not; but though our outward man perish, yet the inward man is renewed day by day. For our light affliction, which is but for a moment, worketh for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory; While we look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen: for the things which are seen are temporal; but the things which are not seen are eternal?"* (2 Cor. 4:16-18) These inspiring words were written by a man who never gave up in his long war.



Every day we speak around 18 to 25,000 words. An average person spends one-fifth of his life talking. The words we use have tremendous power for good or evil. You can be an encourager or a discourager. Putting your interests first can discourage others. The devil wants you to be a discourager but God wants you to be an encourager. Choose to be an encourager.