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THE LORD WHO ENCOURAGES

Acts 23:11

By

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Acts Lesson 60

The Lord Who Encourages Acts 23:11

A retired teacher shared with "Dear Abby" an incident from many years earlier, when she was teaching junior high math. The class had worked hard on a new concept all week and the students were obviously stressed. To take a break, the teacher asked the students to take out a sheet of paper and write down the names of the other students in the class, leaving a space between each name. Then she told them to write down the nicest thing they could say about each of their classmates.

She collected the papers and that weekend wrote the name of each student on a separate piece of paper, followed by what the students had said about that person. On Monday, she gave each student his or her list. Before long, everyone was smiling. She overheard one student whisper, "I never knew that meant anything to anyone. I didn't know anyone liked me that much!"

Years later, the teacher had to attend the funeral of one of those students, a promising young man who had been killed in Vietnam. The church was packed with many of the man's friends who had been in that junior high math class. Afterwards, at the parents' home, the parents said to the teacher, "We want to show you something. Our son was carrying this in his wallet when he was killed." The father pulled out that list of all the good things that the boy's classmates had said about him. "Thank you so much for doing that," the mother said. "As you can see, he treasured it."

A group of the former classmates heard the exchange. One smiled sheepishly and said, "I still have my list. It's in my top desk drawer at home." Another said, "I have mine, too. It's in my diary." "I put mine in my wedding album," said a third. "I bet we all saved them," said a fourth. "I carry mine with me at all times."

That poignant story illustrates how much we all need encouragement. As George Herbert, an English pastor and poet, said, "Good words are worth much, and cost little." To give a word of encouragement to someone who is feeling down is to be like our

Lord Jesus. In our text, He stands by the side of the apostle Paul in his prison cell and says, "Take courage; for as you have solemnly witnessed to My cause at Jerusalem, so you must witness at Rome also." He is the Lord who encourages His people. The Lord encouraged Paul in three ways here that we can apply to ourselves:

The Lord encourages His servants with His presence in their difficult circumstances, His praise for their past service, and His promise of their future service.

1. The Lord encourages His servants with His presence in their difficult circumstances.

This was the fourth time (and last, so far as we know) that the Lord appeared personally to Paul. One time after this (27:23) an angel appeared to him. The first appearance of the Lord was Paul's conversion on the Damascus Road, just before he was struck blind (9:4-6; 22:14). It is possible that during his three years in Arabia the Lord appeared repeatedly to Paul to teach him (implied in Gal. 1:11-17). The second definite time was in the temple in Jerusalem, three years after his conversion, when the Lord told Paul to go to the Gentiles (22:17-18). The third time was when Paul was fearful in Corinth. The Lord appeared to him in a vision at night, telling him to go on speaking, promising His presence and protection, and assuring him that He had many people in that city (18:9-10). And now here, the Lord came and spoke these words of encouragement to Paul in his difficult circumstance. We can learn four lessons about His presence in our difficult times:

- A. The Lord knows all of our difficult circumstances.

The Lord didn't need to send out a team of angels to find out where Paul was. The prison cell and the guards didn't hinder the Lord from finding Paul. He knew exactly where His servant was and what he needed at that moment. And even though Paul didn't yet know it, and the Lord didn't tell Paul about it in advance, the Lord knew of the plot that the Jews were forming against Paul, not to eat or drink until they had killed him. The Lord knows all of our difficult circumstances, and the enemy can only go as far as the Lord permits, and no farther. As Isaiah 54:17 proclaims, "'No weapon that is formed against you shall prosper; and every tongue that accuses you in judgment you will condemn. This is the heritage

of the servants of the Lord, and their vindication is from Me,' declares the Lord."

You may be in a prison of difficult circumstances—a physical illness, a financial crisis, the heartache of a loved one who has no place for God in his life—where you feel that no one knows what you're going through. Whatever your circumstances, and even if no other human being knows, Jesus knows and He cares for you.

B. The Lord is with us in all of our difficult circumstances.

The Lord stood at Paul's side! Most likely, none of us will ever see a physical manifestation of Jesus until either He comes again or we stand before Him at death. Such visible appearances are extremely rare (1 Pet. 1:8), and we should not count on them.

But the Lord is present with us spiritually, and to say that is not to cop out. After giving the Great Commission, Jesus promised, "And, lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age" (Matt. 28:20). Or, as Hebrews 13:5-6 promises, after exhorting us to have our way of life be free from the love of money, "for He Himself has said, 'I will never desert you, nor will I ever forsake you,' so that we confidently say, 'The Lord is my helper, I will not be afraid. What shall man do to me?'"

When we are in the fiery furnace, the Lord Himself stands with us, if not physically as He did with Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-nego (Dan. 3:19-27), very much spiritually, where you can sense His presence. Sometimes He manifests Himself in a special way through His Word. Sometimes it comes through a word of encouragement from another believer. I have experienced both, and they have been precious times, in spite of the difficulties.

In my message on Acts 18:9-10, I shared with you how in my ministry in California, I was going through the most difficult time of criticism that I had ever experienced. I had changed my view from being in favor of "Christian" psychology to being against it, and that change resulted in a barrage of angry letters attacking me and calling for my resignation.

One night, as I was sitting on the edge of the bed feeling discouraged, the reference "Acts 18:9-10" popped into my mind. I had not been reading in Acts and so I don't know how that verse came to my mind, except that the Lord put it there. I grabbed the

Bible beside my bed, opened to those verses, and read how the Lord appeared to Paul in Corinth. He said, "Do not be afraid any longer, but go on speaking and do not be silent; for I am with you, and no man will attack you in order to harm you, for I have many people in this city." I was flooded with the sense of the Lord's presence and His confirmation of the direction of my ministry.

I also began to detect a pattern during that time. It took me a while to notice, but once I began to notice, it was very consistent. Every time that I received a letter attacking me, often in the same day's mail, or at least within a day or two, I would receive an encouraging letter. It was the Lord saying to me, "Take courage! I am with you. Just keep on being faithful to My Word."

As many of you know, shortly after I began in the ministry here, a severe controversy developed between four of our former elders and me. It was a very distressing time. I think it's fair to say that they were trying to force me out of the church. Many of you sent me encouraging notes, expressing your support for my ministry, which meant much to me. But the note that meant the most came from our then 13-year-old daughter, Joy. She wrote,

Mom & Dad, I just want you to know that I really appreciate you even though some other people don't! Don't listen to them. They don't know what they're talking about! Dad, I'm really glad you only preach the truth and don't compromise what the Bible says. Your sermons have helped me lots! A lot of other people have said the same.

Just hang in there and both of you keep up the good work! Look up these verses: they've been an encouragement to me: Jeremiah 29:11; Romans 8:28. I love you lots! Love always, Joy.

Whatever you're going through, if you're a child of God, He is there with you. He will show you His presence through His Word and through the encouraging words of other believers. Lean on His promise never to desert or forsake you! He knows all of our difficult circumstances and He is there with us in them.

C. The Lord understands how we feel in all of our difficult circumstances.

The Lord does not waste words. He does not say, "Take courage" unless He knows that His servant is discouraged. Paul was disappointed over the way things had gone in Jerusalem. The church had not really appreciated his ministry there. He had been falsely accused and had been beaten by the mob. Now he was feeling the depression that usually follows physical injury. He was alone in his cell. He was feeling uncertain and fearful about the future. Would he ever get to preach in Rome, as he wanted to do? Perhaps he was even wondering where the Lord was in all of these trials. After all, he was only human.

The Lord did not condemn Paul for feeling discouraged, but neither did He let him stay there. He understands our feelings, because He is fully human. As Hebrews 2:16 states, "For since He Himself was tempted in that which He has suffered, he is able to come to the aid of those who are tempted." So He fully understands how we feel, but He wants us to learn to deal with our feelings in a godly manner.

You've probably heard the expression, "Feelings aren't right or wrong; feelings just *are*." There is both truth and error in that statement. The truth of it is, we shouldn't deny how we feel in an attempt to look more spiritual. Perhaps I'm feeling angry, but I know that my anger would be sinful, and so I say (with clenched teeth), "I'm not angry!" But it's obvious to everyone else that I'm steaming mad! We need honestly to own up to how we feel.

But the error in the statement is the implication that feelings are morally neutral, and that we're not responsible for them and we can't do anything about them. The Bible is clear that many of our feelings are sinful and need to be confronted and put aside. Anger is usually sinful. Sometimes, depression is sinful, when it stems from self-pity or from not trusting God. Anxiety is sinful, even when we're in the midst of a storm at sea and are afraid that we're about to die! Jesus rebuked the disciples in that situation for their lack of faith (Mark 8:35-41)! Bitterness is always sinful, no matter how badly we've been hurt. So once we've admitted how we feel, we need to process our feelings biblically. That's the fourth lesson:

- D. The Lord gives us a gracious command to encourage us in our difficult circumstances.

"Take courage!" Six out of seven uses of this verb in the New Testament are on the lips of Jesus. To a paralytic, lying on his bed, Jesus said, "Take courage, My son, your sins are forgiven" (Matt. 9:2). To the woman with the hemorrhage who touched the fringe of Jesus' coat, He said, "Daughter, take courage; your faith has saved you" (Matt. 9:22, lit.). To the disciples, who thought that Jesus walking on the water was a ghost, He said, "Take courage, it is I; do not be afraid" (Matt. 14:27; parallel, Mark 6:50). To the disciples on the night He was betrayed, Jesus said, "These things I have spoken unto you, that in Me you may have peace. In the world you have tribulation, but take courage; I have overcome the world" (John 16:33). The only other usage was when the bystanders told blind Bartimaeus, "Take courage, arise! He is calling for you" (Mark 10:49). Truly, Jesus is the Lord who encourages those who are discouraged and without any other hope!

But note that it's a command. It's a gentle and gracious command, but it is a command. That implies that we can choose to obey it or disobey it. We disobey it when we stubbornly refuse the help that He sends us through the promises of His Word or through a fellow believer who tries to encourage us. We obey it when we say, "Thank You, Lord, for Your faithful love," and trust His Word. Thus the main way that the Lord encourages us is with His presence in our difficult circumstances.

2. The Lord encourages His servants with His praise of their past service.

The Lord tells Paul that he has solemnly witnessed to His cause in Jerusalem. He was no doubt referring to Paul's courage when he addressed the mob that had just tried to kill him in the temple precincts. But I think the Lord also was referring to Paul's testimony before the Sanhedrin, although seemingly it had not gone well. In neither instance is there any record of there being any conversions. But making converts isn't our job. Our job is to bear witness for the Lord, and to leave the results to Him.

All too often, we judge our service for the Lord by the results that we can measure or see. How many showed up at the meeting? How many made decisions for Christ? How many gave us positive feedback about what we did? If we consistently receive negative feedback or no visible results, we probably should evaluate whether

our manner or methods are somehow wrong. But in some cases, such as with Jeremiah, we may faithfully serve the Lord for many years with many negative and few positive responses.

The main criteria for evaluating our work for the Lord are: Was I faithful to God's Word? And, was I relying on Him and acting in obedience to what I believed He wanted me to do? If you can answer yes, then, even if you catch criticism, you know in your heart that the Lord was pleased with your service. You offer it up to Him, and you will hear from Him, "Well done!"

The Bible has many promises that the Lord commends His faithful servants. Here are two: Hebrews 6:10 says, "For God is not unjust so as to forget your work and the love which you have shown toward His name, in having ministered and in still ministering to the saints." And, 1 Corinthians 15:58, in the context of the resurrection of the body and the Lord's return, says, "Therefore, my beloved brethren, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that your toil is not in vain in the Lord." Whatever you do to serve Him, He remembers and He will reward you for it. Even if no one else appreciates what you have done, the Lord says, "Thanks for standing for My cause!"

The Lord encourages His servants with His presence in their difficult circumstances and with His praise for their past service.

3. The Lord encourages His servants with His promise of their future service.

"So you must witness at Rome also." The Lord doesn't bother to tell Paul of the impending plot to kill him or of the two years that he will sit in custody in Caesarea. He doesn't tell him of the shipwreck in the Mediterranean Sea or of the fact that he will go to Rome as a prisoner. But He does tell Paul that he will bear witness at Rome. Even if Paul made a mistake by going to Jerusalem (as some say) or by going along with the scheme of going into the temple to participate in a Jewish ceremony and sacrifice (as I think he did), there is no word of rebuke for that here. Rather, the Lord commends Paul for his past service and promises that He is not through with him yet.

Note the word "must." The Greek word means, "it is necessary." Luke uses it about 22 times in Acts. The Lord uses the same

word again through the angel who appeared to Paul in the storm just before the shipwreck and said, "Do not be afraid, Paul; you *must* stand before Caesar" (27:24). When God says, "you must," you know that it's a done deal. It's going to happen. As someone has said, "You are immortal until your work for the Lord is done."

During that time of intense criticism that I went through in California, one evening when I was feeling down, I went into our bathroom to get ready for bed. Our oldest daughter, Christa, who was about 14, had put a post-it note on our mirror that quoted her favorite verse at that time (Jer. 29:11, NIV): "'For I know the plans I have for you,' declares the Lord, 'plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.'" What an encouragement! That was God's promise through Jeremiah to the exiles in Babylon, that after 70 years of captivity, God would visit them and fulfill His word to bring them back to the Promised Land.

But that is also His promise to all of His servants who may feel exiled in some distant Babylon, set aside from His purpose. It is His word to those who feel forsaken in some literal or figurative prison, nursing the bruises that they have received in their service for Him. The Lord says, "I have plans to prosper you, plans to give you hope and a future!" "Take courage, for you must witness at Rome also." Even though you're wounded and tired, if you're still breathing, God isn't finished with you yet. Take courage!

Conclusion

In a sermon on the Lord's words, "Take courage" (*The Westminster Pulpit* [Baker], pp. 18-20), G. Campbell Morgan asks the question, "How are we to obey Him?" How can we take courage when we feel fearful or discouraged? He concludes that the only way is to get a clear vision of the Lord Himself. It is to see Jesus, the author and perfecter of faith, who endured such hostility of sinners against Himself (Heb. 12:2-3). He observes, "All our fear and all our panic result from a dimmed vision of the Lord, a dimmed consciousness of Christ" (p. 19). A few paragraphs later he states, "There is no refuge for the soul of man other than the Lord Christ" (p. 20).

If you're discouraged about your present difficult circumstances, or feeling down about past mistakes you have made, or

anxious about the future, the Lord wants you to take courage. He is with you in your trials, He commends you for your past service, and He promises to use you again in His service as you continue to walk with Him.

And as the Lord encourages you, seek to be His channel of encouragement to others. Remember George Herbert's words, "Good words are worth much, and cost little." If you encourage others, you are acting like the Lord Jesus.

Discussion Questions

1. If we don't sense God's spiritual presence with us, how can we gain it?
2. Is it okay to nurse wrong feelings for a while, or should we confront them and seek to put them off immediately? How can we know whether our feelings are sinful or just "human"?
3. When have you been most encouraged? How can you best offer encouragement to someone who is feeling down?
4. Is our future service for the Lord limited somehow by our past mistakes? If so, how? Is it sometimes enhanced by our past mistakes? Give biblical examples.

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