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ENCOURAGEMENT IN LIFE'S STORMS

Acts 27: 2-3, 21-26, 33-36

By

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Acts Lesson 70

Encouragement in Life's Storms Acts 27:2-3, 21-26, 33-36

A passenger on an ocean liner was enduring a rough Atlantic crossing. As he leaned over the rail, his face a shade of green, a steward came along and tried to encourage him: "Don't be discouraged, sir! No one's ever died of seasickness yet!" The nauseous passenger looked up at the steward with horror and said, "Don't say that! It's only the hope of dying that's kept me alive this long!"

That's probably how Paul's fellow-passengers felt after two weeks of enduring the storm at sea. Not only were they sick; after not being able to see the sun or stars for many days, they had lost all hope of being saved (27:20). In the same way, when people go through severe storms in life, often they lose all hope.

Into this bleak picture, the encouraging words of the apostle Paul brought a ray of light. In verse 22, he urges everyone to keep up their courage, promising that there would be no loss of life among them. Again in verse 25 he says, "Therefore, keep up your courage, men, for I believe God, that it will turn out exactly as I have been told." Yet again in verse 33 we read that "Paul was encouraging them to take some food." The result was (27:36), "all of them were encouraged."

Someone has said, "Be kind. Everyone you meet is fighting a hard battle." Those who do not know Christ need encouragement. Paul describes them as having no hope and without God in the world (Eph. 2:12). They need the hope that only Christ can give. The Lord's people need encouragement. Discouragement is one of Satan's greatest tools, causing many in Christian service to give up and drop out of the ministry. Our families need encouragement. As husbands and fathers, we need to set an atmosphere of encouragement in our homes. The apostle Paul's experience here shows us first, how to receive encouragement from the Lord in the storms of life; and, then, how to pass God's encouragement on to others who desperately need it.

Those who have received God's encouragement in life's storms should encourage others to look to God.

Paul wasn't just an upbeat, positive person who never felt down. Luke's words in verse 20 imply that Paul, Aristarchus, and Luke felt the same as everyone else on board, that there was no hope of their being saved. This is reinforced by the angel's words to Paul (27:24), "Do not be afraid." If Paul had not been discouraged and afraid, he would not have needed this encouraging word. But once he experienced God's encouragement, he then passed it on to others. Before we can pass God's encouragement along to others, we must personally experience it ourselves.

1. We all need personally to experience God's encouragement in the storms of life.

Howard Hendricks often says, "You cannot impart what you do not possess." So how do we receive God's encouragement when we're going through a difficult time? Seven ways:

- 1) We receive God's encouragement by being with His people.

Paul did not have to face this difficult voyage to Rome alone. He was accompanied by Aristarchus, a Macedonian of Thessalonica, and Luke, the beloved physician. Sir William Ramsay, in his book *St. Paul the Traveller and the Roman Citizen* ([Baker], p. 316), argued that to get permission to accompany Paul as a prisoner, Aristarchus and Luke would have had to pass themselves off as his slaves. Aristarchus was one of Paul's traveling companions who had been dragged into the theater during the riot in Ephesus (19:29). He accompanied Paul on his journeys through that region (20:4). Later, writing from Rome, Paul refers to him as a fellow-prisoner (Col. 4:10). This faithful young man was willing to be Paul's slave and to go to prison with him! No doubt Paul was greatly encouraged by such a loyal friend and fellow-worker (Philemon 24).

As the journey to Rome began, the ship put into port at Sidon, and the centurion allowed Paul to visit his friends and receive care (27:4). We often think of Paul as giving care to others, but he also needed to receive care. He taught that we all are part of the

body of Christ, where each member both gives and receives from the other members in order to function properly (1 Cor. 12:12-27).

The current *World* magazine (4/20/02, p. 14) reports that radio evangelist Harold Camping is telling his listeners that they should drop their church memberships, leave their congregations, and just listen to the radio. And many of his listeners are doing what he says. At a conference of some 100 pastors, each one reported losing members because of Mr. Camping's teachings. As the article goes on to point out, the idea has a certain appeal. Sleep in on Sunday, no meetings, no obligations, no messy involvement in the lives of other Christians. But, of course, it is in direct disobedience to Scripture, which tells us not to forsake assembling together, but rather to encourage one another (Heb. 10:25). We receive encouragement by being with God's people.

- 2) We receive God's encouragement when we remember His presence with us.

In this case, it was not the Lord Himself who appeared to Paul (as in 23:11), but His angel (27:23). But it had the same effect, to remind Paul that God was always with him, always aware of the trials that he was going through. When He gave the Great Commission, our Lord promised, "Lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age" (Matt. 28:20). Here Paul again experiences the reality of that promise.

He had experienced it when he was afraid in Corinth. The Lord appeared to him and promised, "for I am with you" (Acts 18:9-10). Paul had also experienced it when he was in custody in Jerusalem, and the Lord stood at his side and said, "Take courage," and promised that he would bear witness at Rome" (23:11). He would later experience it at his final imprisonment, just before his execution. He told Timothy that no one supported him, but all deserted him. Then he added, "But the Lord stood with me and strengthened me" (2 Tim. 4:17). Each of these experiences of the Lord's presence came at times of crisis in Paul's life.

I've never seen the Lord or an angel, and I believe that such experiences are quite rare (1 Pet. 1:8). But I have felt His presence with me in times of great need, and it has flooded me with encour-

agement. Even if we do not have literal visions of Christ or His angels, we have His promise, and it should give us encouragement.

Late in his life, the great pioneer missionary to Africa, David Livingstone, received an honorary doctorate from Glasgow University. As he rose to speak, he was gaunt and haggard as a result of the hardships he had gone through in tropical Africa. He left arm, crushed by a lion, hung helplessly at his side as he announced his resolve to return to Africa without misgiving and with great gladness. He added, "Would you like me to tell you what supported me through all the years of exile among a people whose language I could not understand, and whose attitude toward me was often uncertain and often hostile? It was this: 'Lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the age.' On these words I staked everything, and they never failed!" ("Our Daily Bread," Fall, 1984.)

- 3) We receive God's encouragement when we remember that we are His possession.

Paul tells these rough men on board that he belongs to God (27:23). If you have trusted in Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord, you belong to Him. He purchased you with something far more valuable than silver or gold, namely with His precious blood (1 Pet. 1:18-19). You can be assured that He is going to take care of His expensive purchase.

If you pay a lot of money for something, you don't carelessly toss it into a drawer and forget about it. You put it in a special place and you check on it often. In some cases, if it is very valuable, you rent a safe deposit box at the bank and put it there. God purchased you with the blood of His Son, and He isn't about to abandon you. That should give you great encouragement in the storm.

- 4) We receive God's encouragement when we remember that we are His servants.

Paul calls God the one "whom I serve" (27:23). The Greek word refers to service to God, sometimes with the nuance of worship. It is used of the Old Testament priests offering their service to God (Heb. 13:10). And so it refers to a life that is lived with a God-ward focus. All that we are and do should be offered to the Lord as a living sacrifice to Him (Rom. 12:1-2).

Every Christian, not just those in so-called “full-time Christian service,” should view himself or herself as the Lord’s servant, always on duty. Every contact is an opportunity to represent our Lord Jesus Christ. Throughout the day we should, “Through Him ... continually offer up a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that give thanks to His name. And do not neglect doing good and sharing, for with such sacrifices God is pleased” (Heb. 13:15-16).

If we see ourselves that way, as the Lord’s servants, we can be encouraged in the storms of life, because the Lord looks out for His servants. We’re doing His business, and just as a company looks out for its workers, even more so the Lord looks out for His workers. He has the best employee benefit package of all!

Thus we receive God’s encouragement in the storms of life by being with His people; when we remember His continual presence; when we remember that we are His possession; and when we remember that we are His servants.

- 5) We receive God’s encouragement when we remember His promises.

Paul relates the angel’s words, “you must stand before Caesar.” These words are simply a reminder of what the Lord already had told Paul in Jerusalem (23:11). The word “must” points to divine necessity. When God says, “you *must*,” you know that it *will* happen. He is *always* faithful to His promises.

During Donald Grey Barnhouse’s student days in France, he led a girl to Christ who later married a French pastor. She often came to the Barnhouse home and saw them taking verses from a promise box—a small box that held about 200 promises from the Bible printed on heavy paper curled into cylinders. They would take one out and read it when they needed a word of special comfort. So this French woman made her own promise box, writing these same verses in French.

Years later, during the war, this French family had no food except for the potato peelings from a nearby restaurant. The children were hungry and were almost in rags, and their shoes were worn through. In one of her lowest moments, this woman turned in desperation to the promise box. She prayed, “O Lord, I have

such great need. Is there a promise here that is really for me? Show me, O Lord, what promise I can have in this time of famine, nakedness, peril, and sword.”

Her tears blinded her, and in reaching for the box, she knocked it over. The promises showered down around her, on her lap and on the floor. Not one was left in the box. At that moment, the Holy Spirit flooded her with divine light and joy as she realized that *all* of the promises were indeed for her in that hour of her greatest need (Barnhouse, *Let Me Illustrate* [Revell], pp. 253-254).

And so it can be for you in whatever storm you are going through. As the Lord promises (Isa. 43:1-3),

But now, thus says the Lord, your Creator, O Jacob, and He who formed you, O Israel, “Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name; you are Mine! When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they will not overflow you. When you walk through the fire, you will not be scorched, nor will the flame burn you. For I am the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior.”

6) We receive God’s encouragement when we remember that God answers prayer.

The angel told Paul, “Behold, God has granted you all those who are sailing with you” (27:24). The words, “God has granted,” imply that Paul had prayed, not only for himself, but also for all on board, that they all would be saved from death through the shipwreck (John Calvin, *Calvin’s Commentaries* [Baker], Acts, 2:401). God could have saved Paul, Luke, and Aristarchus, but let the others perish. But instead, He graciously granted to Paul the lives of all on board. The world never knows the protection that it receives because of the presence and prayers of God’s people! Scripture doesn’t tell us how many of those on board eventually came to saving faith in Christ, but I think that many did.

Whenever you are going through a storm, not only pray that God will deliver you, but also that He will grant you the souls of others with whom you have contact during the storm. He may be taking you through the storm for the very reason that He wants to use you to bring the gospel to others “on board” with you. The

fact that He graciously answers prayer for the salvation of others should encourage us in the storm.

7) We receive God's encouragement by believing Him.

Paul tells the others on board to keep up their courage and then adds, "for I believe God, that it will turn out exactly as I have been told" (27:25). God's promises don't do us any good unless we believe Him, that He will do just as He has said, in spite of our current overwhelming circumstances. As the encouraging Hebrews 11 reminds us, it was by faith that the men and women of the past saw God do mighty things on their behalf. When the waves of the storm are breaking over us, we can be encouraged by believing the One who merely spoke the word, and the wind and the sea instantly obeyed (Mark 4:39-41).

So the first thing we need is personally to receive God's encouragement in our storm. Then, having received it, ...

2. We need to encourage others to look to God.

When we're going through a storm, our natural tendency is to focus on ourselves and our problems, and forget about others and their problems. But Paul didn't do that. He didn't keep God's encouragement to himself, or just share it with Luke and Aristarchus. He shared it with everyone on board, and repeatedly encouraged them to take courage on the basis of God's promise of deliverance.

Some of the men on board may have been condemned prisoners, headed to Rome to die in the arena with the lions (Richard Rackham, *The Acts of the Apostles* [Baker], p. 480). They desperately needed Christ. As pagans, if they had made it through the storm, they would have praised their good luck or offered sacrifices to their favorite idols. But Paul wanted to make sure that they knew that it was the living God who delivered them (Calvin, p. 400). And so he made it clear where the source of deliverance came from. I can only briefly touch on them, but notice five ways that we can encourage others in the storm:

1) We can encourage others by being with them in the storm.

As I mentioned, Luke and Aristarchus were with Paul, not only here, but also in prison in Rome. And all three men were on

board with the others in the storm. Often the Lord puts His people into a storm for the good of others. Although Luke and Aristarchus probably said much to encourage Paul, none of it is recorded. The only thing recorded is their presence, and it was no doubt a source of great encouragement to Paul.

Sometimes we hesitate to visit someone who is going through a difficult trial because we don't know what to say. Don't worry about that—just go and be there. Remember, Job's three friends did just fine for the week that they just sat there silently. It was when they opened their mouths that they got into trouble!

2) We can encourage others by praying for them.

After Paul's advice not to continue the voyage had been rejected, he easily could have got his feelings hurt and said, "If that's how they want to be, they deserve to perish!" But he put his feelings aside and prayed that all would be delivered. No doubt these sailors were not nice men with high moral standards. They probably swore a lot, as sailors are notorious for doing. The soldiers guarding Paul and the other prisoners showed their true colors by wanting to kill all the prisoners just prior to the shipwreck. But Paul knew that they all needed the Lord, and so he prayed for them. Even so, we should pray for people in the world who do not deserve God's grace. None of us do!

As we learned in the "Praying for You" seminar several years ago, most unbelievers will respond favorably if you ask, "May I pray for you?" Everyone has needs, and even the most hardened unbelievers will often say, "Well, it can't hurt!" Your kindness may open a door for the gospel. And with fellow believers who are going through the storm, it will encourage them to know that you are praying for them.

3) We can encourage others by practical ministry to their needs.

Paul encouraged these men to eat some food so that they would have the strength to swim to shore (27:34). It was a practical matter, not directly spiritual. But the men were encouraged by it. Often, the most encouraging thing you can do is to take a meal to someone who has been ill, or clean their house or go grocery shopping for them. Don't say, "If you have any needs, let me

know." They won't ask. Just put yourself in their place and ask, "What would I want someone to do for me?" Then do it for them.

4) We can encourage others by setting a good example.

Paul was literally in the same boat with these pagans! He probably got seasick, just as they did. He had been discouraged and fearful, just as they were. But when he received encouragement from the Lord, he openly shared his experience to encourage the others. He gave thanks to God for the bread in front of everyone and then ate, setting the example. The others were encouraged to follow. Especially in our families, our kids follow our example. If we panic and fall apart in a storm, they learn to be fearful. If we trust in God, they learn to trust Him in their storms.

5) We can encourage others by telling them of God's greatness and power to save.

Paul didn't just tell them to keep a positive outlook or to have faith in faith. He told them that he believed God and the promise of deliverance that God had given. Many in this world have faith that everything will turn out okay just because they are positive, optimistic people. But the fact is, if they do not believe in the Lord Jesus Christ as their Savior, everything will *not* turn out okay! Those who believe in God's Son have eternal life, but those who do not believe in Him will perish (John 3:16). So it's not enough to encourage people in a storm by telling them that everything will turn out okay. We must tell them about God and His power to save them from their sins through the Lord Jesus Christ.

Conclusion

From his cell in Bedford Jail where he was imprisoned for preaching the gospel, John Bunyan wrote, "This prison very sweet to me hath been since I came here; and so would also hanging be, if Thou didst then appear." Bunyan was saying that if his trial revealed more of Christ to him, it was worth all the pain.

If God used this storm to reveal more of Christ to Paul or to bring any of the men on board to Jesus Christ, the life-threatening ordeal would have been well worth it. If God encourages you in the storm, reveals more of Himself to you, uses you to bring someone to Christ, or to encourage one of His people, it will be worth it all.

Discussion Questions

1. Trials can make us either better or bitter. What makes the difference?
2. Is it a sin to be discouraged? Why/why not?
3. It is easy in a trial to feel angry toward God. Is this ever permissible? If so, how? If not, how do we deal with it?
4. Sometimes our attempts to encourage someone fail. How can we offer genuine encouragement in Christ? Are there things that we should avoid saying or doing at such times?

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