

Lessons for Living in a Pagan Culture – Meditations on Acts

(by Jim Hughes) [60/365 – 2025-10-05]

Encouragement

(Acts 4.36)

Luke informs us that a Jewish believer in Jesus as the Messiah, a Levite from Cyprus named Joseph, was called Barnabas by the apostles. Luke tells us that this means ‘son of encouragement’. What an honour it was to be recognized by the apostles in such a manner! This Aramaic cognomen means literally ‘son of rest’. However, Luke provides an idiomatic equivalent in Greek. The Greek word which Luke uses for ‘encouragement’ incorporates the sense of one person being called along side another person, such as when a lawyer is called to the side of an accused person to defend him. In its noun form it can mean an advocate or a helper (Jn 14.26). In its verbal form it refers to a person who comes along side another person to provide comfort and assistance. Luke refers to Paul giving encouragement and speaking of encouragement in Acts. Also, Paul refers to the necessity for Christians to be encouragers. Therefore, we should consider what we can learn from Paul about what it means for us to be encouragers.

As Christians we, collectively and individually, can be encouragers by:

- *Reading the Scriptures* (Rom 15.4). When we read the Bible in our private or family times of worship, the words from God will provide us with encouragement. However, it is particularly important that the Scriptures be read in the public assemblies of the Church (1 Tim 4.13). There has been a tendency in many parts of the Church today to minimize the use of the words of the Bible (words from God) and to concentrate on offering up mere-human compositions (words from man).
- *Expounding the Scriptures* (Acts 13.15; 1 Cor 14.3; 1 Cor 14.31). Preaching and teaching how to apply the words of the Bible for faith and practice are important for collective encouragement of believers within a congregation.
- *Worshiping together* (Heb 10.25). Since a primary purpose for worshiping together on the Lord’s Day is to hear the word of God read and expounded, it is key that brothers and sisters in Christ come together. Just being with other believers and worshiping together with them is also a means of encouragement in which each of us can participate.
- *Exhorting, charging* (1 Thess 2.12), *and admonishing one another* (2 Thess 3.12). Preaching and teaching by pastors/elders, and Sunday School teachers can provide the kind of encouragement which builds up faith and directs members of the congregation into the paths of righteousness. However, this kind of encouragement is not confined to the pulpit or classroom. Each of us can direct our peers to increased faith and holy living through well placed words. For example, Paul speaks of the use of the Psalms, which are the words of Christ, as an effective means of accomplishing mutual edification (Eph 5.18-19; Col 3.16).

- *Speaking positive words* (Acts 16.40; Acts 20:2 [a different word in Greek, used only once in the NT]; 1 Thess 4.18; 1 Thess 5.11). The Psalms are full of words of exhortation, admonition, and comfort. A timely quotation from the Psalms, when another person is despondent, discouraged, or feeling deserted, can help lift his spirits. Paul speaks specifically about using words which reflect on the promises of God to build and reveal the everlasting Kingdom of Jesus Christ.
- *Praying with and for a person* (Eph 6.18-19). Although Paul does not give an explicit connection between prayer and encouragement, his actions of encouraging congregations would have undoubtedly included prayer. When a Christian is aware that he is being prayed for he knows that others care for him, and that God hears their petitions on his behalf.
- *Providing words and actions of comfort* (Eph 6.22; Col 4.8; 1 Thess 5.14; 1 Tim 5.1). Just being present when a person is feeling ‘down’ can be helpful. At times, an embrace or loving hug or holding the person’s hand can help. Also, actions such as visiting a person in a retirement home or hospital, providing a ride to a doctor’s office or the supermarket, remembering his birthday, or providing a pre-cooked meal can provide comfort and help a person overcome feelings of helplessness and loneliness.

There are likely other ways that we can be encouragers. It is important that we think consciously about how we can do it. For example, we could work regularly through the congregational directory and take the next person or family on the list and ask ourselves, what can I do to encourage him, her, or them.

To be encouragers requires that we have a positive attitude about God’s unfolding providences in the world and in our lives, the temporal and spiritual blessings of our life in Christ, and our everlasting hope. People who are gloomy and doomsayers cannot be effective encouragers. Paul gives us guidance for having the right attitude in order to be encouragers. This includes:

- Being a positive model of faith (Rom 1.12) and life (2 Thess 3.12), and trust in God (Acts 27.36 [a word used only once in the Greek NT]).
- Focusing on the promises of God and the hope set before us (Heb 6.18).
- Rejoicing with a cheerful outlook (Phil 4.4) and giving thanks always, in all circumstances (Eph 5.20; 1 Thess 5.18).
- Speaking positive, edifying words (Eph 4.29; Eph 5.4; Col 4.6; 1 Thess 5.11).
- Not displaying anxiety or fear (Phil 4.6).

Encouragement is a gift from God (Acts 9.31; Rom 15.5), through knowing Christ (Phil 2.1-2; Col 2.2). Therefore, the ability to be an encourager is a gift given to the Church by God. We are earnestly to seek to have the good gifts (1 Cor 12.31-13.13; 1 Cor 14.12) which will build up and edify the Church. It would be great if we had the gift of encouragement and could be called a ‘Barnabas’.