

“The All Important Ministry of Encouragement”

Acts 20:1-16

Who would you describe as an encourager; someone who always has an encouraging word, affirms others and just makes you feel encouraged because you spent some time with them? Doesn't even have to be a lot of time. Might be just the way they greet you.

Acts 20 is all about Paul's ministry of encouragement to the Christians he worked with or visited in his journeys. There's a lot of place names mentioned here but its not an itinerary; it's not Paul's agenda; it's the churches and homes of people where Paul spent time to encourage believers in their spiritual maturity. My prayer from this passage is that we would take more seriously our own ministry of encouragement and see people how Paul saw them; as those who need to be built up in the Lord through the spiritual gifts, talents and resources God has given us in the time God has given us.

Again v.1 reminds us that we are still in the context of Ch.19. “When the uproar had ended”. What uproar? The riot in Ch. 19 that was caused by Demetrius, a silversmith, who was upset that Paul's preaching was changing many lives and these new Christians exchanged their idol/Artemis worship for God. This hurt sales. Demetrius spreads falsehoods about Paul saying his message is going to destroy Artemis worship and that idols aren't real gods. This resulted in a great disturbance (v.23), confusion (v.29) and here Luke uses a different word [uproar] in 20:1 which means ‘violent opposition to authority’. Which maybe he meant tongue in cheek because the riot was really caused by these business men who were violently opposed to the authority of God.

But after this was over Paul “sent forth and encouraged” these disciples, who, but for the grace of God may have been killed for their faith! Then Paul revisited the churches where he had already been

speaking many words of encouragement to the people, and finally arrived in Greece,³ where he stayed three months.

So Paul reminds us that

Everyone Always Needs Encouragement **(20:1-6)**

The Greek word for ‘encouragement’ is actually one of the names given the Holy Spirit in John 14:16 where Jesus said after He left He would send one like Himself, the Comforter (the Holy Spirit) to be with us and in us. The word literally means ‘to call someone along side you.’ That involves intentionality. People don't ask you ‘Hey, can you encourage me today?’ It's something we are commanded to do in the Bible. Paul prays this for us in Rom. 15:5

⁵ May the God who gives endurance and encouragement give you the same attitude of mind toward each other that Christ Jesus had, ⁶ so that with one mind and one voice you may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Not surprisingly encouraging fellow believers glorifies God because it shows our Christlikeness shining through. When should we encourage one another? We see here we should encourage one another

In the tough times and routine times (vv.1-2)

When the uproar had ended, Paul sent for the disciples and, after encouraging them, said good-bye and set out for Macedonia.

This was a very difficult time for the Ephesian believers. Perhaps this is one of the reasons why Paul wrote to them in Eph. 6 about standing firm in the armor of God in spiritual attacks from the enemy. These people hated what the gospel was doing. They started a riot. Paul had to be held back from getting involved. It could have gotten a lot worse. Paul sensed these believers needed encouragement to endure suffering and opposition. To know God was with them in the difficult situations in life.

Then he returned to the churches in Macedonia (v.2); Philippi, Thessalonica and Berea among the more well known,

He traveled through that area, speaking many words of encouragement to the people, and finally arrived in Greece,³ where he stayed three months:

There was no pressing matter in these churches at this time. This was part of Paul's usual ministry, encouraging, building up, helping believers think and live like Jesus. And while Luke is just going quickly through Paul's travels we actually get clues from some of Paul's letters that he probably wrote 2 Corinthians when he was in Macedonia and when he was in Greece (Corinth) for 3 months, he probably wrote Romans. And when you read his letters he almost always began all his letters with a reminder that he prays for the believers everywhere as often as possible. And his primary prayer was for spiritual growth.

But lest we think Paul was perfect we also see in vv.3-6 that

Even encouragers need encouragement (vv.3-6)

Because the Jews made a plot against him just as he was about to sail for Syria, he decided to go back through Macedonia.⁴ He was accompanied by Sopater son of Pyrrhus from Berea, Aristarchus and Secundus from Thessalonica, Gaius from Derbe, Timothy also, and Tychicus and Trophimus from the province of Asia.⁵ These men went on ahead and waited for us at Troas.⁶ But we sailed from Philippi after the Feast of Unleavened Bread, and five days later joined the others at Troas, where we stayed seven days.

If you recall from 19:21 Paul is trying ultimately to get to Rome but not until he returns to Jerusalem first. So his plans were to sail back to Syria (north of Israel) to get there as soon as possible. We'll come back to why in a minute. As they were planning the trip they learn of a plot against Paul's life, probably on the ship itself. Paul changes plans and goes by land and he's accompanied by at least 7 men (in v.4) many of whom are mentioned elsewhere in his letters. And Luke reappears too.

⁵ *These men went on ahead and waited for us at Troas.* ⁶ *But we sailed from Philippi*

Luke had stayed back in Philippi strengthening the believers while Paul continued on elsewhere. On his way back through Luke joins them again. Paul never travelled alone. He always ministered with others. Why? Probably Rom. 1:11 answers that

¹¹ I long to see you so that I may impart to you some spiritual gift to make you strong— ¹² that is, that you and I may be mutually encouraged by each other's faith

Along with his general joy of being around other believers and the threat against his life Paul also needed encouraging. And one more reason, probably happening here in v.5 at Troas. In 2 Cor. 2:12-13 Paul wrote,

¹² Now when I went to Troas to preach the gospel of Christ and found that the Lord had opened a door for me, ¹³ I still had no peace of mind, because I did not find my brother Titus there. So I said good-bye to them and went on to Macedonia.

He concludes that story in Ch. 7:5-7,

⁵ For when we came into Macedonia, this body of ours had no rest, but we were harassed at every turn— conflicts on the outside, fears within. ⁶ But God, who comforts the downcast, comforted us by the coming of Titus, ⁷ and not only by his coming but also by the comfort you had given him. He told us about your longing for me, your deep sorrow, your ardent concern for me, so that my joy was greater than ever.

Somewhere around this time in Acts 20 Paul was concerned about Titus who hadn't shown up yet. Plus he mentions conflicts of harassment and personal fears within – anxieties about believers. So Paul was in need of encouragement as anyone else was. And all of us need encouragement. The best time to do it is anytime God's Spirit prompts you to do it – call, visit, text when God leads you. How do we know God is leading us? The Spirit brings people to our mind as His way of saying, contact them. Sometimes its just a brief connect other times a longer visit is warranted. And if you think God brings someone to your mind that you don't think needs any encouragement, assume you are wrong and the Spirit is right. Because everyone needs encouragement.

Paul, Luke and their ministry partners continue on their journey going from Philippi to Troas and stayed there for a Week. On the last day Paul spoke for a long time even until midnight, encouraging the believers there. Paul knew how to encourage fellow followers of Jesus and that was to

Use God's Words to Encourage **(20:7-12)**

It's interesting that in v.7, 9 and 11 Luke uses the word 'talking' not teaching. Not because Paul wasn't teaching God's Word but because talking implies informal dialogue, discussion, questions and teaching obviously. They were discussing God's Word and sharing that with one another.

To encourage people with God's Words doesn't only mean share verses it means share God's perspective based of course on His Word. Point people to God and His Word. When we do that with one another

It builds us up together (vv.7-8)

V.7 'we came together and broke bread'; v.8 'we were meeting' ; [or gathered together depending on translation]. Luke has a strong emphasis on unity and togetherness. Since we all share the presence of God's Spirit, when we gather with one another to discuss our Christian walk, God's Spirit speaks into our hearts and builds us up in the faith – together. This is something we all need.

Paul spoke for an unusually long time and with all those oil lamps burning people got a little tired and on poor fellow whose only appearance in the Bible is to let us know he fell asleep in church – died falling out the window. And that's why you don't want a window seat in church! Or the dangers of falling asleep in church! I actually heard a message about this one time and the speaker referred to an example from a prominent evangelist from a few hundred years ago, who interrupted his message when someone fell asleep on him, yelled 'Fire, fire! To which the gentleman woke up startled, only to tell him that people that fall asleep in church are on their way to hell!! What a terrible, terrible lack of grace.

I remember hearing another sermon on this passage where the speaker waxed eloquently on the dangers of spiritually 'sleeping' and drifting away from the Lord. Seriously? That's what this passage is about? I don't think so. It's about what Paul did for him. Paul miraculously brought him back to life somewhat similar to Elisha laying on the young boy that brought him back to life in 2 Kings 4.

If Paul hadn't healed him or kept on speaking that would have been very callous of Paul. But because the Word of God spoke to Paul's life he

Applied it to himself producing the fruit of compassion (vv.9-12)

When this all over in v.12 we read that the people there were "greatly comforted" which is the same Greek word in v.1 and 2 for encourage. When you apply the Word of God to your own life as you read, study and share it, we should be showing that through spiritual fruit. Paul wasn't so insensitive as to keep preaching while Eutychus (whose name means Fortunate!) lay dead outside. He stopped, healed him, fed him (and perhaps it means they all had something to eat) continued to teach until the morning because he was heading towards Jerusalem where the Spirit had already indicated that he was going to suffer there.

This was Paul's farewell speech. He didn't know if he would ever see these people again. We know this especially from the second half of Acts 20 when he talks to the Ephesian elders who say goodbye to Paul and they all end up crying together (v.37).

If you like to study the Word and talk about the Word of God a lot to friends and family but it's not changing your heart and developing the fruit of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, etc. in your life, then there is something wrong. You are not applying the Word to yourself. Jeremiah said in Lam. 3:40,

Let us examine our ways and test them, and let us return to the LORD.

In the last 4 verses it seems mostly like Paul's itinerary, his agenda. While Luke gives no details and if Paul was really in a hurry, why stop at all these places? [show map]. If, judging by his time in Troas where he used his last night to encourage believers in the Lord and as we'll see in the rest of the Chapter where he takes time to encourage the Ephesian church leaders in the Lord, can we not safely presume that Paul made all these stops to encourage believers there or share the gospel? And why was Paul in such 'a hurry' to get to Jerusalem? Sight-seeing? See his family? If in

the context of Acts 20 Paul wrote Romans from Corinth while he was in Greece for 3 months (20:3) then in Rom. 15 he tells us why he's in a hurry to get to Jerusalem:

²⁵ Now, however, I am on my way to Jerusalem in the service of the saints there. ²⁶ For Macedonia and Achaia were pleased to make a contribution for the poor among the saints in Jerusalem. ²⁷ They were pleased to do it, and indeed they owe it to them. For if the Gentiles have shared in the Jews' spiritual blessings, they owe it to the Jews to share with them their material blessings. ²⁸ So after I have completed this task and have made sure that they have received this fruit, I will go to Spain and visit you on the way. ²⁹ I know that when I come to you, I will come in the full measure of the blessing of Christ.

Everywhere Paul went he met people there and it was his goal to encourage them in the Lord or lead them to the Lord. So here's a good biblical application we can take from Paul and Heb. 3

Make Encouragement Your Daily Goal **(20:13-16)**

If we read a command in the Bible then we are required to show we are followers of Jesus by obeying it.

Heb. 3:12 See to it, brothers and sisters, that none of you has a sinful, unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God. ¹³ But encourage one another daily, as long as it is called Today, so that none of you may be hardened by sin's deceitfulness. ¹⁴ We have come to share in Christ if we hold firmly till the end the confidence we had at first

Brothers and sisters refer to believers. Sometimes believers can be sinful and hard-hearted and not be walking with God as they should. So what will help them not be hardened by sin's deceitfulness? "Encourage one another daily." That reduces hard-heartedness and produces endurance. This is what Paul was all about. And encourage means 'call someone to yourself'; you initiate the relationship.

Ask how people are doing? Ask them about work, family, spiritual habits, struggles. Share your own. Share bible verses or biblical truths that will build them up.

Some people can read 'Paul was in a hurry' and think, 'Yup, that's me. Just like Paul. I got places to be and things to do.' NO! That's not why Paul was in a hurry. He was in a hurry to help people in Jerusalem.

Our goal is people, not our agenda (vv.13-16a)

If you have daily goals or an agenda, let me ask you a question. Who is on your agenda? Are people on your agenda not because you need them to do something for you or you have to but because you want to connect with them for no other reason than to encourage them and build your relationship with them. We who are type A personalities we like to cross things off our lists and feel like we accomplish things. But I have changed the way I over the years about the goals I set and the agenda I make for the week. It's more about people than tasks. Yes, there are things that we have to get done; but we fail if we accomplish our goals and ignore or hurt people along the way. People are your agenda, not your job or your to-do-list.

And if you're in a hurry

Hurry because people are in need (v.16b)

Paul needed to get to Jerusalem because he was going to help the poor there. And if you read Rom. 9:1-5 and 10:1-5 Paul had a passion to reach Jews for Jesus. Why Pentecost? Because Jews flocked to Jerusalem on the holy days.

So, the most important thing we learn from Acts 20:1-16 is don't fall asleep in church? Memorize all the places Paul travelled? Be in a hurry to conquer your agenda? No.

Encourage one another. Build one another up using God's Words. Initiate calling people to come along side you. Share your life with someone else.

One of the sins that deceives and produces a harvest of hard-heartedness are the lies of self-pity based on the sad truth that people aren't connecting with you. 'No one calls me. No one invites me to their house ...' We get discouraged. However, encourage means you and I go and be the encourager. And guess what will happen? We'll be encouraged.

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