

November 10, 2024  
As You Are Going: The Ministry of Encouragement  
Acts 20:1-12  
Vernon Advent Christian Church

Intro...

In Acts 13-19, we have looked into the story of Paul's three missionary journeys and the primary focus has been on Paul's ministry to unbelievers. Now in chapter 20, the narrative shifts, not that Paul is no longer sharing the gospel with those outside the Church, but, as his missionary journeys are coming to a close, Luke highlights Paul's ministry to believers. Specifically, Paul's ministry of encouragement.

Paul's model for ministry always included both non-Christians and Christians. Likewise, we should strive for a balance of sharing the gospel with unbelievers and ministering to believers. Living a life on mission is not only about reaching the lost with the message of the gospel, but also about living it out in a community of believers encouraging and lifting up one another along the way. As Christians, it is our ministry to encourage and support one another. And we're going to see the importance of encouragement in our passage today. If you are able please stand with me as I read our passage for today from Acts 20:1-12. [Read]

First, we see Paul's encouragement to the disciples in Ephesus, Macedonia and Greece in verses 1-3. After spending 3 years in Ephesus, Paul, under the leading of the Holy Spirit, had planned to leave for Macedonia and eventually head back to Jerusalem, but the riot that took place in Ephesus, that we looked at last week, had held him up for a few months. We read in vs. 1 that "After the uproar had ceased" and things settled down a little bit, Paul felt like it was time to proceed with his original plan. But he didn't just go. We're told that before left, he "sent for the disciples" to gather them together so that he could say "goodbye" and encourage them one last time. After all they had just been through a riot and were no doubt still facing the lingering effects of persecution. The Greek word translated here as "encouraging" is "parakaleo" which literally means "to urge, console, comfort, and cheer up." With Paul leaving, he felt it was really important to lift the spirits of these believers, to encourage and to help them keep the faith in the midst of darkness and difficulty. And we get the sense that here, as well as, in the passage that we will look at next week, that Paul knew that he would most likely never see these disciples again as we see his ministry wrapping up in the Book of Acts.

After saying his goodbye's at the end of vs. 1, we see that Paul then "departs for Macedonia," and, again, we come across the same word, "parakaleo" in vs. 2 in reference to Paul's ministry to the churches in Macedonia and Greece. It says he shared "many words of encouragement to the people" because they were suffering in various ways. It was not popular to become a Christian, let alone be a Christian, in those days, not much different than it is now. Coming to faith in Christ and making that public through baptism often invited harassment, abuse, and sometimes all-out persecution. And these young churches needed all the encouragement they could get. We can assume that Paul encouraged them by simply spending time with them, praying with them, and sharing God's word with them. You know, it's not easy living out the faith in our culture today. So, we need to encourage one another to stand strong. It's much easier to stand when we feel like we're part of a team and that we're encouraged. And we see the importance of that type of encouragement play out in these verses.

Well after spending time with the believers in Macedonia, Paul went to Greece, specifically the city of Corinth, for three months to encourage the saints there. Then in vs. 3 we read that when he was set to leave, his plans to sail straight back to Syria were changed because it was discovered that the Jews were plotting to kill him, probably while onboard, so that he went by land back through Macedonia to Philippi. It seems like an aside, but God had more encouraging for Paul to do, so he protected him from this threat and sent him back through Macedonia to do just that, most likely going back to some of the very same churches that he had just been to be offer even more encouragement.

At this point in the text, in vs. 4-6, we are introduced to several of the men traveling with Paul and we see the encouragement to the believers in Jerusalem through financial support of the Gentile churches. As Paul began to make his way back to Jerusalem, he was accompanied by a group of men from all of the areas where Paul had planted churches. Luke names them individually and tells us where they are from, but why? What difference does it make for us to know who these men were and where they were from? Well, Luke doesn't mention it here, but we learn later in Acts 24 and from three of Paul's other letters, in 1 and 2 Cor. as well as Romans, which were all written during this period of time by the way, that he went back to the Gentile churches to ask for financial contributions to encourage and support the Christians in the church at Jerusalem because of a great famine. Paul hoped that this offering would be a real expression of the unity between the Gentile Christians with the church in Jerusalem. The long list of these men represents the churches that made contributions as a way of accountability. Remember, there was no paper money in those days, and they didn't accept checks or credit cards, so these men were carrying around a lot of bags of coins. Almost all of Paul's Gentile churches are mentioned, therefore signifying there was a lot of the support for the Jerusalem church. Paul and each of these men, and the churches they represented, saw it as their ministry to encourage other believers through their financial support.

We're introduced to Sopater from Berea and Aristarchus and Secundus from Thessalonica who represented the Macedonian churches; Gaius of Derbe and Timothy of Lystra who represented the Galatian churches; and Tychicus and Trophimus representing the Asian churches. One interesting detail here I thought important to point out, as David Guzik in his commentary makes the same argument, is that Aristarchus' name is from the word we get our English word "aristocracy" from, so it's likely that he came from a wealthy and powerful family. And Secundus, who is also said to be from Thessalonica, was a common name for a slave. His name literally means "Second." In Guzik's words, "Slaves were often not called by their true names, and the first-ranking slave in a household would often be called Primus. The second-ranking slave was often called Secundus." Whether it was true of their statuses or not, it's nice to think of these men from two different stations in life finding common ground and serving the Lord together and helping Paul. I find it encouraging that the old saying is true, "the ground is level at the cross."

Just like Paul and the churches represented by these men, it should be part of our ministry to encourage others through our financial support. There are many ways for churches and individuals to do this. For us as individuals, the support of our local church through our tithes is and should be our top priority. We are all members of this body and it is where we are fed spiritually and where we grow in our faith. Nothing should take precedence over our faithful and generous support of the local church. For through our tithes, the ministry of this church allows for the gospel to continue to shine in our community. For the Christian this is not an option, but

the command of scripture, to give back to God a portion of what he has given to us. And that starts with the local church.

On top of that, it is also wise and good for us as individuals to support Christian ministries outside of the local church. This could happen by pledging support to a foreign missionary on our own, supporting a child through an organization like Compassion International, supporting a rehab facility like Teen Challenge, or a Pregnancy Resource Center like Branches, or something else. We don't have to support all of these, but if the Lord has blessed you with enough to give beyond your tithe to the local church, we can offer our encouragement through our support to these Christian organizations and others like them. The simple question is, how are we responding to the needs of other Christians? Are we giving our generous and faithful support to the church first and then to others who are in need? Or are we too busy trying to protect what we have?

The passage goes on to tell us that then these men sail across the sea to Troas and Paul meets back up with Luke in Philippi, and as you may have noticed the text begins to read "we" and "us." So what's going on here? Luke, the author, had first joined up with Paul in Acts 16, during his second missionary journey, and was left in a leadership position in Philippi, and now after about 10 years as Paul makes his way back to Philippi, Luke rejoins him here in our text and will remain with him as an eye witness to the rest of the events found in the Book of Acts.

And so Luke and Paul meet up with the others who had left a week or so earlier in Troas and here we see the encouragement that comes through gathering together of the church in vs. 7-12. Right away we find the earliest indication that the early church began to gather on Sunday, the first day of the week which was a switch from the Jewish practice of Saturday worship. They did this to recognize that God was now doing something different in recognition of the resurrection of Jesus that took place on Sunday. And this practice has continued throughout 2000 years of church history.

And the worship gathering usually took place in the evening, since Sunday was just a normal working day (and not a weekend like it is in our day). Luke notes that "they gathered together to break bread," which refers to the Lord's Supper, which they would do every time they got together to remember the atoning work of Jesus for them. We also see that they gathered to receive instruction from God's word. All this was done to mutually encourage one another simply by gathering together.

We read in vs. 7 that Paul "talked with them" and this is from translated from the word "dialegomai," and its where we get our word "to dialogue" from. It means that Paul was having a discussion with them, reasoning back and forth, instead of just lecturing. But this discussion goes long into the night, as before with the Ephesian disciples, Paul recognizes it's most likely his last night with these folks and the text says that he "prolonged his speech until midnight."

Now picture this, it's midnight and, most likely, most of these people had already been working all day, and they had gathered together to hear the Apostle Paul one last time. Luke is very descriptive here and says there were many lamps in the room where they were meeting and its more than likely pretty hot and stuffy with all those people crammed in there. And we're told there was a young man, most likely a teenager, and his name was Eutychus. Ironically, his name means "fortunate," but unfortunately for him, he winds up falling into a deep sleep while sitting in a third story window. And even though we may snicker at the story, most likely because we already know the outcome, this was no laughing matter. The text says he fell out of the window all the way to the ground and died. And if there was any doubt that he really died, because the

text reads a little funny in the English, we must remember that the author, Luke was, again, there as an eye witness and also a doctor, and he says that he “was taken up dead.”

Can you imagine the panic? The pain? The confusion? I wonder, did he have family members there? Parents? Brothers or Sisters? How could this happen? But, we’re told Paul came down, took him in his arms and miraculously brought him back to life. With very little detail as to how by the way. And you would think that after all the excitement of this miracle that they would have called it a night and gone home, but it says they all go back upstairs, get something to eat and Paul picked up right where he left off and continued preaching to daylight, a full 12 hours from when he first started!

In verse 12, Luke uses the word we’ve focused in on this morning “parakaleo” for the third, and final, time in our passage. It says that they “took him away alive and were not a little comforted.” The believers in Troas were greatly encouraged when Paul raised the young man Eutychus from the dead. Who wouldn’t be?

You know there’s something about gathering together with other believers that’s encouraging in itself. Yes, we are to actively seek out ways to be encouraging to each other like we saw in the first few verses today, but just something about being together, especially when we gather together on Sunday morning, that brings encouragement to our souls. For when we gather, we can share in what God is doing through us, even the miraculous, like when he raised Eutychus from the dead by the hand of Paul. Through the ministry of this church, God is bringing the dead to life, spiritually speaking, and we all get to take part in it!

Luke uses the word for encouragement or comfort three times to describe Paul’s ministry to these believers. Therefore, we would be wise to follow Paul’s example for our own lives. Yes, sharing the gospel with non-believers is important, but so is encouraging our brothers and sisters in Christ. We all have problems; we can all use a little encouragement. We all go through times in our faith and life when we have doubts. We all struggle with sin and sometimes wonder why God allows bad things to happen. We know we need encouragement.

Is there anyone in your life who you know could use a little encouragement today? Is there anyone that you haven’t seen in church for a while and you wonder how they are doing? Is there anyone that you work with or go to school with that you know is going through a difficult time?

I know, we’re all busy and it’s not easy to take the time to be intentional about encouraging one another. But as we’ve seen throughout the Book of Acts, Paul made a lot of personal sacrifices to encourage other believers. Numerous journeys that led to several near death moments all for the sake of the gospel. Are we willing to sacrifice some of our personal time and resources to encourage each other? As Christians, it is our ministry! If we’re going to be a church on mission, then we must take seriously the ministry of encouraging one another. Let’s pray.

“May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit. Amen” – Romans 15:13