

Acts 11:19-26 (PM)

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[0 : 0 0] Over the past couple weeks, I've been reading a book called The Invisible Kingdom. And in it, the author details her journey through chronic illness.

And throughout the story, she recounts again and again feelings of pain, fatigue, and rejection. She describes her experience as an entry into an invisible kingdom, a kingdom that is unseen, neglected, and forgotten by society.

And at one point in the midst of her story, she laments that her friends, though well-meaning, give these hollow encouragements. She states, quote, And at its best, this type of encouragement is an empty mantra, and all it does is it just makes us feel good.

But at its worst, it rings hollow and is dismissive. And in many ways, I have to think that the early church, in the midst of this cruel persecution, experienced similar feelings of pain, fatigue, and rejection.

And yet, unlike the hollow catchphrases we so often hear and perhaps even say, the church was known for real, sustained, and faithful encouragement.

[1 : 2 4] You see, the early Christians understood that they were not invited or brought into an invisible kingdom, but they were brought into an everlasting kingdom where Christ himself is at work. And that reality changed how they encourage and should change how we encourage as well.

And so this evening, in our short passage today, I'd like to look with you at the role of encouragement. And I'd also like to look at it through the lens of encouragement, because you may not know this, but we're actually in the midst of an application series.

And this text in particular, if you read the Bible studies, is called The Encouraging Church. And so what I'd like to do is look at the role of encouragement and how we can apply it to our day-to-day lives. And so my sermon this evening has just two points, just two points.

First, the source of encouragement, or where we get encouragement from. And second, I want to look at the practice of encouragement, or what real encouragement looks like. So the source and the practice.

But before I step into the text, two things. First, may I encourage you to pull out the Pew Bibles in front of you and turn to page 920 if you haven't yet to follow along with the text.

[2 : 3 3] And second, if you would please join me in a word of prayer. Heavenly Father, we thank you for the word that you have set before us this evening.

I pray that this evening that your spirit would come down and you would open our hearts to receive this encouragement. And that we would become a church known for our encouragement.

That we become a church known for our love and for our grace and for our mercy. Father, give us eyes to see and ears to hear. I pray this in your son's name. Amen.

So point one, the source of encouragement. So at the start of our text, in chapter 11, we see two main threads suddenly converging together in the history of the church.

Two threads. And that first thread is the story of persecution. Turn with me to verse 19. There it states, Now those who had been scattered by the persecution that broke out when Stephen was killed traveled as far as Phoenicia and Antioch, spreading the words only among the Jews.

[3 : 32] Now, I don't know if any of you have ever been part of a church plant that was forced to close down its doors. Or perhaps you've been part of a thriving ministry. Maybe a college ministry or a young adults ministry.

That over time found itself imploding with dissension. Or maybe just decaying because people and leaders left. If you've been in any kind of situation like that, then you can probably imagine what the early church must be going through in this time in Acts.

You see, after rapid and exciting growth, the Spirit was present. The Jerusalem church suddenly found itself in trouble. Stephen, their new deacon, their new protege, is tried and stoned by Saul.

Their friends, their brothers that they worship with, are physically dragged out of their homes and thrown into prison. James, one of Jesus' inner three disciples, is going to get beheaded by Herod very soon.

And so to the outside world, this early church movement looked like it was about to fall apart. And within the early church, things sure looked grim. But our text reminds us here that Jesus has other plans.

[4 : 45] You see, at the beginning of Acts, in chapter 1, Jesus didn't leave his disciples with a command and empty encouragement. He didn't go and say, You got this. Good luck. No.

He gave them a command and promised them that they will witness, not just in Jerusalem, not just in Judea and Samaria, but to the ends of the earth. So when we read that out of persecution, the early church grows, we shouldn't be surprised.

For that's how God works. You see, God uses and redirects the evil and hate of this world in order to fulfill his promises. I've once heard it described by a seasoned pastor that God is not like a military commander.

This pastor was American, obviously. But God is not like an American commander. He doesn't constantly mount offensive attacks. And that's sometimes what we want, don't we? We want to see God mount offensive attacks against sin and evil.

Instead, God's more like a martial artist. He takes on the attack and he redirects the force of his attacker for his own purposes. Christ redirected sin and evil on the cross in order to bring about his salvation.

[5 : 57] And now Christ is at work redirecting evil and persecution to bring his gift of salvation to all peoples. Friends, in other words, our source of encouragement is found in the fact that God is always and ever in control.

And yes, there is pain. Yes, there is hurt. And yes, there is suffering. But in God's plan and in God's kingdom, there is no pain without a promise.

There is no hurt without hope. And there is no suffering without salvation. God's in control and his promises always have the last word.

Now, as I mentioned, this opening section in chapter 11, it ties two threads together. The first thread is persecution and how God uses that persecution to bring about his kingdom. And the second thread that we read about is the Greek conversion.

Look at verse 20. Some of them, however, went to Antioch and began to speak to the Greeks also, telling them the good news about Lord Jesus. And listen, friends, listen. The Lord's hand was with them.

[7 : 10] And a great number of people believed and turned to the Lord. This is one of the most significant acts in church history. And we cannot underestimate how important it is.

The conversion and inclusion of the Greeks shifts the entire paradigm for the church. No longer is the church simply a subset of Jewish religion.

Rather, the purpose of the church is now to bring the gospel, the good news to everyone, including Gentiles. And friends, don't miss the importance of this. That paradigm shift will have ripple effects throughout the book of Acts, throughout the rest of Scripture, and throughout history.

And it has led to you and me being in this very room tonight. The early church knew how encouraging this was. And so one of the most important acts of history has occurred.

And what's astounding about it is the most important act in history is done by ordinary, unnamed people. Did you pick up on that? An action that changed the course of world history is performed by anonymous men and women.

[8 : 22] Lorraine Bettner, who is a 20th century theologian, illustrates the significance of this, and I think he puts it beautifully. He says that, quote, though God has legions of angels at his command, has legions of angels at his command, he instead chooses to spread his kingdom through imperfect men and women.

Imperfect men and women. Friends, in Vancouver, it can feel impossible to spread the gospel.

It can feel scary to even mention the name Jesus. But remember who is ultimately at work in the hearts of those around us. Our encouragement to one another is not that, what doesn't kill you makes you stronger, or, hey, you got this.

Our encouragement is found in that little phrase, the Lord's hand was with them. Friends, take courage in the fact that God chooses to work in and through you and me to fulfill his plan of salvation.

So to recap, our source of encouragement is not because we've got this, or because life will just work itself out. No. As many of you in this room know, there's pain, there's suffering, there's hurts.

[9 : 40] But we are encouraged because God is in control and will use those pains, those sufferings, and those hurts to bring about his kingdom. And he does it through ordinary people like you and me.

So that's point one, source of encouragement. It's quite hot tonight.

My second point is this, the practice of encouragement. Let's look at how the early church encouraged others throughout this text.

And it's worth noticing, by the way, who the church actually decides to send to Antioch. As we'll see in chapter 15, or if you read chapter 15, when the church began to accept Gentiles in mass, it wasn't always received well with the church, right?

There were divisions, there's councils that have to work these things out. But as the news reaches Jerusalem here about these Gentiles coming to the church, they don't respond with cynicism or suspicion.

[10 : 36] They don't send the person who goes, yeah, sure, that's great. They've got good numbers, but how many people actually show up on Sundays? They don't send the guy who goes, yeah, Antioch, that's the new hot church plant right now, but let's see how they do when things really get tough.

No, they send the guy who goes, let's go. This is awesome. We've got to celebrate this. They send Barnabas. And when he arrives and he sees the grace of God, he is glad.

He's not jealous that this church is more cosmopolitan or that their numbers are growing, while the Jerusalem church is stuck in a sort of religious lockdown. He rejoices. Outside circumstances cannot shake his joy over new Christians.

And I've experienced something like that when I became a new Christian. I don't know if any of you have, but in the summer of 2006, when I was exploring Christianity, I met my friend's grandfather.

He was a deeply spiritual and deeply religious man, and he's got an amazing testimony that I don't have time to get into. But here's the thing. I met him once, and then I saw him one other time three years later. And a lot had changed.

[11 : 48] By that point, I was a professing Christian, and he had lost most of his savings and retirement funds in the 2008 financial crash. But when he saw me again at his home church, his face lit up, and he grabbed me in a bear hug that I was not ready for, and said, it's so good to see you again, Willie.

And it's such a vivid memory, because I've rarely experienced such profound gladness and profound encouragement in the same moment like that. And I have to think that my friend's grandfather took Jesus' words to heart when he told his disciples in Luke, there is rejoicing in the presence of God over one sinner who repents.

You see, to my friend's grandfather, a new believer, a new convert, was far more important, and it was a source of greater joy and comfort than his wealth could ever be. How many of us could say that's true of us?

How many of us, in the midst of tragedy, can actually rejoice with the angels in heaven when a lost sheep comes back into the fold? It's easy to let cynicism or suspicion creep in.

But if you really believe that Christ is at work in this world, then there's absolutely no room for cynicism when it comes to conversion. Real encouragers don't worry about numbers or having the right type of person.

[13 : 09] They rejoice, and they're gladdened easily. Now continue with me in the text and watch what Barnabas does, or read what Barnabas does.

Verse 23 states that Barnabas, quote, encouraged them to remain true to the Lord with all their hearts. At least that's how the NIV puts it. Encourage them to remain true to the Lord with all their hearts.

You know, one of the things that I've noticed about Scripture as I've been reading it more and more, or at least as I've been reading it this year, and I'm kind of ashamed how long it took me to realize this, but whenever Scripture talks about encouragement or perseverance or endurance, it never says, just do it.

It never says, accomplish more. It never says, try harder. Because that's the language of self-sufficiency, and that's the language of achievement. Instead, Scripture often instead uses the language of remain, stay, abide.

Remain, because that is what Jesus commanded his disciples. Remain in me, and I will remain in you. The language of perseverance, of endurance, and of encouragement is not about what we do.

[14 : 21] It's about what Christ has done for us, and us remaining in that truth. But remaining or staying in that truth is not a passive activity.

Don't make that mistake. Remaining is not a passive activity. The text says, remain true to the Lord with all your heart. And this morning, as I was talking to the senior youth about it, Karen Roberts mentioned that the language of remaining true reminded her of archery.

I don't know if any of you would do archery here. But when an arrow remains true, it hits the bullseye. But for that arrow to remain true, it requires discipline, attention, and focus.

And that's really hard to do, especially when we live in a culture that's defined by distraction and amusement. On top of that, by our very nature, we're spiritually apathetic creatures.

We need people to come and shake us awake. We need others to help us remain true to the Lord. We need others to point out the blessings and promises of Christ. We need others to say, look at all the heavenly blessings we have in Christ.

[15 : 32] As Paul tells the church of Ephesus. We need people, and we see that play out in our text before us in verse 26. You see, in verse 26, Barnabas stays a whole year.

And I find that fascinating. It's such a small detail. But Barnabas doesn't offer just, hey, I got a three-day workshop, and then I'm going to peace out. You know, he's sent to investigate, and instead of just going and coming back, he relocates his entire life to be faithfully present with new converts.

Friends, we need others to be faithfully present with us, and we need to be faithfully present with others, pointing people to Christ. And so, by way of a quick application, if you're here today, and you're not plugged into a smaller group of Christians that meet regularly to encourage one another through Scripture and prayer, can I encourage you to come join one?

Come talk to me. Come talk to Ben. You can talk to Mark. You can talk to Lorna. We have plenty of people here on staff. Come find us on Soup Sunday. So, return with me to the text.

There we see Barnabas. He rejoices with newcomers. He encourages them to remain true to the Lord. He relocates his life to be faithfully present with new converts. And we see in verse 25 that he goes to get Saul.

[16 : 50] Now, I have to imagine that Barnabas is looking around at his ministry and going, Look, I'm an encourager, but this church is going way too fast for me alone. I've got to get somebody who knows how to really teach. And I've got to get somebody whose calling is to the Gentiles.

And this is so radical in a shame honor culture of this time. Right? Instead of trying to consolidate his own greatness, to puff up his own ministry, Barnabas goes and gets the one person who will, from this point onwards in scriptures, eclipse him in the book of Acts.

Barnabas's concern for the well-being of others means that he gladly steps aside for someone else to help. And that's where humility comes in. Encouragement requires humility.

And if we're to practice encouragement in our church here today, then we should be happy to step aside, to step out of the way for others. It's like being in a band. So I'm told. I don't play an instrument, so correct me if I'm wrong here, Emma.

But I hear it's like being in a band. Sometimes you get to play a solo, and that's pretty great. But often, you'll need to play a supporting role while someone else's gifts take center stage.

[17 : 57] And are we willing to do this for the sake of one another? Friends, I've been describing what Barnabas does here and what encouragement looks like through the lens of Barnabas.

But please don't walk away here tonight thinking, yeah, this church needs more encouragement. We should put an ad up and see if we can find a Barnabas. We're all called to encourage.

And we can do so because encouragement, friends, is ultimately a response to God's grace. We welcome outsiders because God welcomed us.

We rejoice in the gospel spreading because God rejoices when one sinner is saved. We walk faithfully one another because Christ entered into our brokenness.

He entered into our brokenness and walked faithfully with us and still walks faithfully with us. We seek to humbly put the needs of others first because Christ himself humbled himself and laid down his rights for our sake.

[19 : 00] And we do all these things not from our own strength, but because God's plan is sovereign and his promises are sure. And so the fruits of living like this as a community, not just individually, but as a community, I think is seen in our last verse.

There it says, at the very end, we end with, the disciples were called Christians first at Antioch. And they didn't take on that label themselves. Somebody else called them Christians.

And I have to wonder that it was probably because here was a community in the midst of Antioch that was so different that people sat around asking, who are these people? This is not a community that's brought together by a similar hobby or by ethnic affiliation.

They're not a Tuesday night bowling league or a middle-class parents group. The only thing we can tell is that they have the name Christ constantly on their lips, and they love each other in a very different way.

You see, when a Christian community lives encouraging lives, it looks completely different from the world around us, and it's spiritually attractive.

[20 : 07] Let me illustrate. Yesterday, my wife Kathy was on a walk and met one of our neighbors. And in the conversation, it came out that he was Jewish and my wife was Christian.

And our neighbor had the most interesting response. You know, I don't know how many of you say this around Vancouver, but often you get a look of, oh, and then kind of a turn and walk away. But here the neighbor went, oh, I love Christians.

I run a business, and I got a couple of Christians working for me, and it's fascinating because they actually really care about what they're doing in trying to live out their lives. Friends, that's a picture of anonymous people living faithful lives, not hiding from their Christianity, but sharing it openly and impacting the people around them.

You see, that's how God works. He works through anonymous people, and it's attractive to people. Let me draw us here now to a close to return with me to my opening story.

The author of this book was dissatisfied with her friend's encouragement, and it's easy to see why. Our culture mistakes encouragement for cheering up. It mistakes encouragement for making someone feel better.

[21 : 23] And from a worldly perspective, that's the best we can offer in the face of uncertainty or pain. But friends, we as Christians have so much more to offer to people outside the church and to each other.

You see, encouragement is the action of giving someone support, confidence, or hope. And we have the ultimate support. We have the ultimate confidence. We have the ultimate hope in Christ Jesus.

And so friends, would you please pray with me as I finish this sermon? Heavenly Father, we thank you for the grace you have given us today. May we reflect on the goodness of your words and promises, encourage us, and create in us and in our church something new.

Father, we pray for your son Jesus Christ to come and revive our hearts and revive this city. We pray that we'd be known as an encouraging church to our neighbors. We pray this in your son's name.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.