

Encouragement

1Samuel 23:14-18

By Phillip G. Kayser at DCC on 8-28-2011

Introduction

You might think that a famous preacher like Charles Spurgeon, who was an inspiration and encouragement to hundreds of thousands, would not need encouragement himself, but he did. I think all of us do from time to time. Let me read you a statement he made one time when he was *really* down in the dumps. He said, “Discouragement... creeps over my heart and makes me go with heaviness to my work... It is dreadfully weakening.”¹ David was experiencing that, and verse 16 says that Jonathan “**strengthened his hand in God.**” That phrase implies that David’s hand was feeling dreadfully weakened. Discouragement saps the motivation out of you. It makes it difficult to keep on keeping on.

The purpose of today’s message is to cast some vision on being an encouraging church. If we will all strive to be like Jonathan, strengthening one another’s hand in God, this church will continue to thrive. I think this is an encouraging church, so this is not a call to change. This is a call to keep perfecting that wonderful grace of encouragement.

I. The Need (vv. 14-15)

And of course, the first thing we see in verses 14-15 is that David definitely needed the encouragement. It says, “**And David stayed in strongholds in the wilderness, and remained in the mountains in the Wilderness of Ziph. Saul sought him every day, but God did not deliver him into his hand. So David saw that Saul had come out to seek his life. And David was in the wilderness of Ziph in a forest.**”

There are three things in those two verses that could have produced the discouragement that David felt. The first was isolation. Three times it mentions the wilderness of Ziph. It is a rugged barren area. The very word in the Hebrew is mournful. It speaks of isolation. And two of the Psalms that David wrote during this period make it clear that David felt forsaken by God (Psalm 22) and forgotten by God (Psalm 13). He reminds himself in those Psalms that God will not leave him, but he still has this overwhelming

¹ Charles Spurgeon, *Messages of Hope and Faith* (Cleveland, Ohio: Publish House of the Evangelical Association, nd).

feeling of isolation. It's not as if he didn't have people around him. He had 600 men with him. But you can still feel isolated even when you are in a crowd. It's a sense of being let down; of being forsaken. And for David I think this was especially heightened in that he was distant from his loved ones. He missed his wife. He missed his parents. He missed going to synagogue and to the temple. He felt isolated from the most important things that had previously been happening in his life.

The second thing that is highlighted in these verses and in each of the Psalms that David wrote was a sense of being misunderstood and mistreated. We all feel bad when we are misunderstood and mistreated, don't we? His *own* men loved him, but David still felt the pain of Saul treating him as an enemy, slandering his name, and trying to kill him. I mean, who wouldn't?

And that brings up the third thing that is highlighted in these verses - the danger that David was experiencing. Most of us can handle danger for a short period of time. But when you are being sought day after day like David was, it wears on you. And the Psalms reflect David's exhaustion from the constant danger and the constant running.

So that was David's need. The need of your spouse, or your child, or your friend in this church might be different. They may be living under the discouragement of financial impossibilities. They may be living in a work situation that is anything but pleasant. Their discouragement might be simply the discouragement of being on a squirrel cage - running like crazy and seeming to get nowhere. Mothers can sometimes be discouraged when it feels like they are constantly cleaning up after people and there is no end in sight. Or all day long they have been changing diapers, cooking, washing clothes, picking up after the kids, breaking up fights, and at the end of the day the father comes home and asks, "What have you been doing?" And she feels ready to break down and cry because the results of her constant work may not be evident. It's important that we not interpret the discouragement of others only in terms of what discourages us. Each person's needs are unique. And if we will keep an open eye to what might be possibly discouraging to others, we will be better prepared to be encouragers like Jonathan.

II. The Process (vv. 16-18)

A. Encouragement requires conscious planning and effort (v. 16b)

Let's take a look at the process of encouragement (or strengthening the hand of other believers). First of all, we see that encouragement requires

conscious planning and effort. Verse 16 says, “**Then Jonathan, Saul’s son, arose and went to David in the woods and strengthened his hand in God.**” This took some planning and effort. And the reason I say that is that verse 14 shows that Saul had been seeking for David every day and despite his resources, could not find him. How does Jonathan find him? I think he had to do some research of his own.

But beyond planning and research, it took finding the time to arise and go to David. I’m sure Jonathan was a busy guy, but he made the time to find David and to talk to him.

Wouldn’t it be wonderful if every week every one of us tried to find a discouraged David and encourage him or her? This is really a mark of Christian maturity – that our planning includes ministry to the saints. And I know that some of you do this wonderfully well. God sees your ministry of encouragement and *He will bless you*. It is guaranteed. It is impossible to outgive the Lord. Just as we all have financial budgets, we probably ought to consider having part of our time-budget given to encouragement. It’s a kind of charity. 1 Thessalonians 5:14 says, “**comfort the fainthearted, uphold the weak, be patient with all.**” He is telling us to plan for it and to put it into our schedules.

B. Encouragement is strongest when it is God-centered (v. 16c)

The second thing that we see is that encouragement is strongest when it is God-centered. Verse 16 does not say that Jonathan strengthened David’s hand in himself. It says, “**and strengthened his hand in God.**” This is not about giving self-confidence. This is not a support group, or therapy group, or self-help group where misery loves company and where we tell each other, “Hi, I am Nicky, I am an alcoholic and will always be an alcoholic.” That is not Biblical encouragement. No. This is about pointing the discouraged person to Christ, His grace, His resources, and His victory. Nothing else will truly strengthen our hands in God.

Of course, there is a paradox here. We also need each other. Why? Because God has ordained that we be the vehicles of His grace to each other. Ephesians 4:29 says that God uses our words when they are seasoned with salt to “impart grace to the hearers.” So though everything points to God, I still need you; you need each other. God has appointed each of us in the body as a means of grace to help each other to endure to the end. But we need to do it in a way where we will depend on God and not on ourselves. Does that make sense? If the encouragement is to be long lasting, it must

move people into faith and hope in God. Otherwise it is just a humanistic counterfeit.

C. Encouragement involves giving perspective (v. 17)

The third thing that encouragement does is that it gives a person perspective. When you are discouraged, you tend to have blinders on and cannot see the context of what God is doing. And a friend can help you to gain a little bit of perspective.

In the early 1900's there was a young musician who was ready to give up because the reviewers had so harshly criticized his concerts. And the famous Finnish composer, Jean Sibelius, told him not to give up. He patted the young man on the shoulder and said, "Remember, son, there is no city in the world where they have a statue to a critic." That was giving perspective. And the young man began to realize that his focus had been lost by looking almost exclusively to the critics – almost treating them like God. A good part of what Jonathan said in verse 17 was giving David perspective.

D. Encouragement instills courage in those who are fearful (v. 17a)

The fourth thing that I see in this passage is that encouragement instills courage in those who are fearful. Verse 17: "**And he said to him, 'Do not fear...'**" This distinguishes genuine encouragement from flattery. Nor is encouragement simply praise for a job well done. It involves giving courage to those who are about ready to give up; whose hands are dragging on the ground. David's hands needed to be strengthened because he was feeling overwhelmed. That's why Paul said, "**I urge you, brethren,... encourage the fainthearted.**" Though praise is always a welcome thing within the church, this is something that goes much deeper. It is lifting up a dragging spirit. And you are serving Christ when you strengthen the hand of such a person.

E. Encouragement should be founded on God's promises (v. 17b-c)

The fifth thing that I see is that Jonathan founded his encouragement on the promises of God. Why could Jonathan say with such confidence, "**Do not fear, for the hand of Saul my father shall not find you. You shall be king over Israel...**"? Is this a rash promise? Those of you who saw the movie, Patriot, might remember Benjamin Martin making a solemn promise to his daughter that he will come back. He couldn't really know that. He was going into a battle where it was far more likely that he would *not* return. He said it just to comfort her, but he really couldn't know it. That's an empty promise that you may or may not be able to keep. That's different than what

is going on in verse 17. Jonathan *knows* that David will be king because God *promised* that David would be king. It's true that he made a wrong assumption that he would survive and be second in command to David, but he knew that it was guaranteed that David couldn't die. And two of the Psalms David wrote during this period reflect this confidence in the midst of discouragement.

The only basis for David's courage is faith in God, and the only source for David's faith is God's revelation. And so Jonathan tries to bring David's lagging faith back to the sure promises of a God who cannot lie. God has not promised us that you will live for the next seven years. But He has given us hundreds of promises that we can bank on just as surely. As Paul said in Philippians 4:19, "**my God shall supply all your need according to His riches in glory by Christ Jesus.**" You can bank on that.

F. Encouragement looks to the interests of others more than our own (v. 17)

The sixth thing that I see about Jonathan's phenomenal encouragement was that he was looking to the interests of David more than to his own interests. Here he is the *crown prince*, saying in verse 17, "**You shall be king over Israel, and I shall be next to you.**" Jonathan loved David so much that it didn't bother him that David would have a higher position than he would ever attain to. This takes grace – to encourage your children when they are going beyond you; to encourage your husband when he gets recognition that you don't get; to pray for a friend to get a job promotion when you haven't gotten one in three years.

USA Today told the story of Rickey Henderson and Lou Brock at the record setting baseball game in the Oakland stadium. Lou Brock had held the record for the highest number of stolen bases in baseball history – a phenomenal 938. Brock was already retired, but when he realized that Rickey was going to set a new record on May 1, 1991, he attended the game to *cheer him on*. Now, isn't that interesting? He was cheering on a guy who was going to surpass him. When the media questioned him about this, he said, "I'll be there. Do you think I'm going to miss it now? Rickey did in 12 years what took me 19. He's amazing." And he continued to sing Rickey's praises despite Rickey eventually besting him 1,406 stolen bases to his 938.

To me, it a sign of real success when you can rejoice in the successes of others even when those successes overshadow yours. This is what the Holy Spirit does – He constantly points to Jesus, who in turn points to the Father, who on His part says, "**This is my beloved Son; hear Him.**" Each

member of the Trinity shows more concern about the interests of the others than for His own. This is why Romans 15:5 calls God the God of encouragement. That means that is of His very nature to encourage. He overflows with encouragement. And when the Triune God puts the impress of His character upon our hearts, He causes us to do the same. This is why Paul said, “**Let this mind [that is, the mind of Christ] be in you.**” “**Let nothing be done through selfish ambition or conceit, but in lowliness of mind let each esteem others better than himself. Let each of you look out not only for his own interests, but also for the interests of others.**” (Philippians 2:5,3-4). We are the best encouragers when others can see that we care for them more than we care for ourselves. If our church continues to have the atmosphere of Philippians 2:3-4 we will continue to thrive. We will.

G. Encouragement involves believing in others (v. 17)

The seventh thing that I love about Jonathan’s encouragement is that Jonathan really believed in David. He had believed in David from the time that David was a teenager. He believed in David when nobody else did. And the very presence of that attitude did wonders for David. It’s no wonder that in the Psalms David writes at this time he ends them with renewed confidence in what God will do through Him. This was not a humanistic pumping up of David. It was a realistic appraisal of what God was doing through him.

When I was in the early grades of elementary school I had a teacher who thought I was stupid, and I met her every expectation. I did poorly in her classes. I thought, “If I’m stupid, why bother studying? I’ll work on something that I’m good at.” And I did – which meant that I rarely came to class with my homework done, which meant that I got spankings from the teacher every day – ten whacks on each side of each hand every day. Her only attempts to motivate me were negative motivations. (Now, I may be remembering wrong, but that’s my strong memory of those years.)

But for a couple months I got a substitute teacher who could see my potential and invested in me. And she had a *huge* impact upon me. During a time in my life when I was away from my parents, was spanked one to three times a day, was excluded from the in-crowd, and was picked on by older bullies, she believed in me. She had a confidence that God’s grace could enable me to accomplish all things through Christ who strengthened me. And my hand was strengthened in God. I remember suddenly working my tail off because of her encouragement. And I suddenly realized that I could

get good grades if I tried. But it was her belief in me that seemed to make all the difference.

Brothers and sisters, if the only encouragement you give is the encouragement of the rod (which still must be present), you are missing out on one of the most powerful facets of encouragement. Paul expressed this kind of confidence in what God could do through his churches repeatedly. Just one example: he told the Roman Christians, **“I myself am confident concerning you, my brethren, that you also are full of goodness, filled with all knowledge, able also to admonish one another”** (Rom. 15:14). He was confident in them. He believed in them because he knew what God’s grace could achieve. It’s no wonder that Rome saw every member ministering. I think this is one of the reasons why almost every family in this church has significant ministry inside or outside the church. It’s because we see the family as the foundation for ministry, and rather than trying to pull everyone into programs and insisting that only the church is competent, we believe in you as families. Anyway, Paul’s belief in what God could do through the Romans inspired them to excel. I’m not calling you to believe in people humanistically. I am calling you to be confident in what God can do in them. After all, that is what is meant in strengthening David’s hand *in God*. It’s only God’s work in David that enabled Jonathan to believe in him. Let’s have that same confidence in each other in this congregation. Let’s believe in each other.

H. Encouragement comes from those who exemplify courage (v. 17d)

The eighth aspect of encouragement that I see here is that the best encouragement comes from those who exemplify courage themselves. Look at verse 17 again: **“You shall be king over Israel, and I shall be next to you. Even my father Saul knows that.”** Jonathan had not kept his loyalty to David a secret. And we have already seen in the previous chapters how angry this made his dad. One time Saul tried to kill Jonathan over his loyalty to David. So this shows incredible courage on Jonathan’s part. It is hard to give courage to someone else when your own knees are knocking. Courage is contagious.

And by the way, this is why Saul’s army fled when great danger approached. It’s because their leader, Saul, was characterized by fear, not by faith. There are repeated stories from history of courageous leaders like Wallace and Robert the Bruce instilling in their wavering men a willingness to fight and die because of their own daring and courage. But we see many

examples in the Bible too. Think of Barnabas. He got the name, “son of encouragement” because his encouragement flowed from his own modeling of courage. It took courage for Barnabas to sell a large chunk of land in Acts 4 and lay it at the apostles’ feet. Many people would want to save that for a rainy day because of fear of the future. But when God called, Barnabas responded with faith. It took courage for Barnabas to stick up for Paul in Acts 9 when everyone was shunning him. It took courage for him to encourage John Mark when Paul kicked him off the team. Courage begets courage.

I. Encouragement is mutual (v. 18a)

Which means that encouragement must be mutual. You’ve got to encourage your Barnabases. Even the biggest encouragers in history have themselves needed encouragement. It would be hard for Jonathan to continue in his calling within the system and it would be hard for David to continue in his calling outside the system. So they made a covenant with each other in verse 18. **“So they made a covenant before the LORD.”** And this is what church is about. We have covenanted not just to attend church, but also to enter into a relationship with each other. And part of that relationship is encouragement. If you look at the 39 one-anothering verses that were in your membership covenant, you will notice that most of those related to this important topic of encouragement. We are covenanted with each other to be encouragers.

J. Encouragement doesn’t have to be constant to be powerful (v. 18b)

But this brings up the contrast of point J. Even when providentially hindered from regular one-anothering, a one-time encouragement can still be powerful. Verse 18 ends, **“And David stayed in the woods, and Jonathan went to his own house.”** They never saw each other again because Jonathan died in battle. Yet it is evident from David’s eulogy over Jonathan in 2 Samuel 1 that this encouragement of each other had been profound. When my parents were on the mission field I remember that they were greatly encouraged by a one-time care package from one church, and a letter from another. They didn’t get constant encouragement, but the occasional rays of light that came in those days were wonderfully encouraging. Perhaps you could send a care package to a missionary, or a note of encouragement.

Let me tell you the story of a guy whose hands were greatly strengthened simply through a note. He had been fired from a lucrative white-collar job for a mild indiscretion. And he was thoroughly repentant,

but he couldn't find anyone to employ him in that line of work. So he became a hod carrier just to be able to put food on the table. All day long he was carrying concrete block up the fifth level of a construction site. In fact, you can see a picture of a hod carrier in your outlines. It was hard work. And the foreman was abusive and used intimidation to motivate the men to work harder: He would say things like this (but with something in place of the blanks): "For _____ sake, you _____, can't you do anything right? I never worked with such a bunch of _____ in my life. ____, _____, _____." He was constantly surrounded by the abuse of the foreman and the teasing and hazing of the older workers. He had made a few mistakes, and everyone was talking behind his back on what an idiot he was.

By the end of the third week he couldn't take it anymore. He said to himself, "I'll work till break time this morning, and then I'm going home." But he did stick around until lunch. Just before noon, the foreman came around with paychecks. As he handed the man his envelope, he made his first civil comment to him in three weeks. He said, "Hey, there's a woman working in the front office who knows you. Says she takes care of your kids sometimes." "Who?" The foreman gave the name of the woman, and he realized it was a woman from church. When he opened his envelope, he found, along with his check, a handwritten note from the payroll clerk that said, "When one part of the body of Christ suffers, we all suffer with it. Just wanted you to know that I'm praying for you these days." He stared at the note, astonished at God's timing. He hadn't even known that the woman worked for his company. And at his lowest hour she gave him the courage to go on, and to push another wheelbarrow of mortar up that ramp.² In fact, it was her note that enabled him to keep that job.

You may never know the impact of a word or note of encouragement, but she was right: when one part of the body of Christ suffers, we all suffer with it. That's why we encourage each other. That's why we are covenanted to each other.

K. Encouragement aids us in God's calling, but does not substitute for God's calling (v. 18b)

The last aspect of Jonathan's encouragement that I see is that encouragement should never make people bail out of their responsibilities. Jonathan went back to his work *within* the system, and David went back to his work of leading these 600 men *outside* the system. Encouraging our

² From Dean Merrill, *Another Chance*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1981), p. 138

children does not mean doing the difficult job for them. Some parents have suffered so much when they were younger that they try to shield their children from all pain. And as a result they short-circuit God's purpose of causing these children to depend upon *Him* in their calling. That is not encouragement; that is helping your kids to escape from their responsibilities. Encouragement is designed by God to help motivate people to do what God has called them to do even if they don't feel like they are able. Encouragement gives us the faith to expect great things from God and to attempt great things for Him. Encouragement helps people to re-shoulder their responsibilities that they are about to give up on, and with renewed zeal and motivation to serve God. We are short-circuiting encouragement if we feel so sorry for them that we agree that they ought to quit, when it is clearly God's call for them to be faithful. Encouragement is not a call to bail out. It is giving every reason to continue to be faithful to God. It is what Hebrews 10:24 talks about as stirring up love and good works.

III. The Result (v. 18b)

And of course, that in a sense was the end result of Jonathan's encouragement of David. 2Samuel 1 shows that both renewed their zeal in serving the Lord. Both found themselves strengthened in their faith. Both found themselves doing what seemed impossible through the strength of the Lord. The encouragement spurred them on to be faithful to God.

Charlton Heston had to learn how to drive a chariot with four horses when he acted in the movie *Ben Hur*. He did quite well, but he joked with the director, "I think I can drive the chariot all right, but I'm not at all sure I can actually win the race." The director responded, "You just stay in the race, and I'll make sure you win."

That's the way it is with us, brothers and sisters. We are encouraging each other to stay in the race and watch our heavenly Director make us win, and watch God's power made perfect in our weakness. Jonathan had to stay in the difficult race of working within Israel. David had to stay in the difficult race of working outside the system. But 2Samuel 1 makes clear that they were both winners. They were both winners for many reasons (obviously the supreme reason being God), but one little part of that was that they engaged in mutual encouragement.

Conclusion

Let me end with a story told by John Trent, the President of Today's Family, in his newsletter, *Men in Action*. It's a story about a black girl by the name of Mary. He said,

Mary had grown up knowing that she was different from the other kids, and she hated it. She was born with a cleft palate and had to bear the jokes and stares of cruel children who teased her non-stop about her misshaped lip, crooked nose, and garbled speech. [You know how mean kids can sometimes be when they are not monitored.]

With all the teasing, Mary grew up hating the fact that she was “different.” She was convinced that no one, outside her family, could ever love her ... until she entered Mrs. Leonard’s class.

Mrs. Leonard had a warm smile, a round face, and shiny brown hair. While everyone in her class liked her, Mary came to love Mrs. Leonard.

In the 1950’s, it was common for teachers to give their children an annual hearing test. However, in Mary’s case, in addition to her cleft palate, she was barely able to hear out of one ear. Determined not to let the other children have another “difference” to point out, she would cheat on the test each year. The “whisper test” was given by having a child walk to the classroom door, turn sideways, close one ear with a finger, and then repeat something which the teacher whispered into the one ear.

Mary turned her bad ear towards her teacher and pretended to cover her good ear. She knew that teachers would often say things like, “The sky is blue,” or “What color are your shoes?”

But not on that day. Surely, God put seven words in Mrs. Leonard’s mouth that changed Mary’s life forever. When the “Whisper test” came, Mary heard the words: “I wish you were my little girl.”³

It didn’t cost the teacher anything to say that, but it was an investment that paid huge dividends in that girl’s life and strengthened her hand in God. What is it that you can say, write, give, or do for someone in this congregation that might be a similar investment? If you ask God and keep an open eye, I think you will all notice many opportunities of being a Jonathan, investing encouragement in the life of a David or a Mary. And as you do so, may the blessing of the Lord be poured back into your lap 100-fold. Amen.

³ John Trent, Ph.D., Vice President of Today’s Family, *Men of Action*, Winter 1993, p. 5

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