

Encouragement - Something We All Need

Our **Call to worship** is inspired by Romans 15: 4-13

Gather around, you are welcome here, and you will hear Good News. In a world where there are so many discouraging and negative voices it is the God of encouragement who will speak to you today.

So come in, relax, let your tiredness roll away. Lift up your hearts, and listen.



As we reflect on God's goodness and grace today, take a moment to consider these words spoken by various people – and may they be a word of encouragement to you.

"The greatest glory in living lies not in never failing, but in rising every time we fail." Said Nelson Mandela.

"Hardships often prepare ordinary people for an extraordinary destiny." wrote C.S. Lewis.

"Everyone has inside them a piece of good news. The good news is you don't know how great you can be! How much you can love! What you can accomplish! And what your potential is." Said Anne Frank.

"The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases; his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness." – from Lamentations 3:22-23

"Jesus looked at them and said, 'With man it is impossible, but not with God. For all things are possible with God.'" – Mark 10:27

Join with this **prayer**;

Empowering God of grace and mercy, I invite your presence into this place today. I come with joy to greet you and to hear again and again the amazing news: Christ is risen and that you have given me new life in the name of your Son, Jesus.

Father, this is the day you have made, and I will rejoice and be glad in it! For you promise your beloved rest between your shoulders. You are ever so close to me, Father. I can do all things through you ... for you are the source of my strength. Let all I do honour you, Father. As you encourage me, let me be an encouragement to those around me.

Remind me when I falter and fail that you uphold me. Your merciful hand has purposed my life, and I cannot outrun your love or free gift of salvation by Jesus' sacrifice for me. Father, you weave my story throughout ancient history and onto tomorrow. Lord, you number my days and surround me with your love. When I am down, send Your Holy Spirit to remind me of your loving kindness.

May praying, listening, and proclaiming be a testimony to the power of your love to make me a new creation in your community of faith, in the name of the risen Christ. Amen.



Our **Scripture Reading** today is taken from the book of Acts 4:32-37

The Believers Share Their Possessions

All the believers were one in heart and mind. No one claimed that any of their possessions was their own, but they shared everything they had. With great power the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus. And God's grace was so powerfully at work in them all that there were no needy persons among them. For from time to time those who owned land or houses sold them, brought the money from the sales and put it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to anyone who had need.

Joseph, a Levite from Cyprus, whom the apostles called Barnabas, which means 'son of encouragement', sold a field he owned and brought the money and put it at the apostles' feet.

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### **Barnabas, The Son Of Encouragement**

Take a moment to picture yourself back in the early church. Jesus has died, risen, and ascended back into heaven. It's after Pentecost and Peter's powerful preaching. Believers met in the temple courts and from house to house and in Acts 2:42 onwards we read that "they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. The apostles are in charge and providing leadership for the church, and "the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved." Yet with many people, there are many needs and they cannot meet them all, as we learnt when Stephen and Philip, with five others were elected to be deacons. However, just before this happened we are given a brief introduced at the end of Acts 4 to one of those whom the Lord added to their number, a man of generosity and who loves God. Some call him 'Cyprus Joe' and he is one of the most important men in the New Testament, and one with a message to share to each one of us today.

We read that he sells off some land and gives the proceeds to the Apostles. His real name is Joseph and he is a Levite. Now Levites were not known for owning a lot of land. When the tribes of Israel entered the Promised Land, the land was divided up between the tribes, but the Levites were not given land, because they were to be devoted to the service of the Lord. Yet here is Joseph having land - probably a small property that was passed down to him. More than this, Joseph was not from Jerusalem, but from Cyprus, an island many miles away and he makes himself one with these fellow believers. We all know and have experiences that as a Christian believing in Jesus, we can go a thousand miles away, walk into a church, and be one with people you have never met before in your life, all because of our oneness in Christ. Joseph cared enough about the Jerusalem Jews that he was willing to sell his land and give the money for the sake of the believers who were in need. We read too, that the apostles knew Joseph: there was something that made him stand out. In the church at Jerusalem are thousands of converts, yet this man Joseph is well known to the apostles, so much so that they have even given him a nickname: Barnabas - Son of Encouragement.

'Cyprus Joe', well known for his encouragement is Barnabas to all. What are you known for this day? If someone were to go to your neighbourhood, or your family, or your work place, what would people say about you? So often we go to funerals, and we hear the minister or someone stands up to say something about the deceased life, more often than not it's something good as their life is remembered and celebrated. We have every opportunity now to make a commitment that we will choose to be identified now for the good we do.

Barnabas had a special gift – and in Romans 12:4-8 we find these truths mentioned about Christians and their gifts. Just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, so in Christ we who are many form one body, and each member belongs to all the others. We have different gifts, according to the grace given us. Barnabas had a gift of encouragement, and he used it to build up the believers. He offered encouragement wherever he was a gift consistently used throughout his life, for the account of Acts 4 was not just a one-time act of kindness.

The next time we meet Barnabas is in Acts 9:23-28. It is quite a while later, the Gospel has gone to Samaria with success. Here Barnabas is being an encouragement to Paul, once known as Saul the Pharisee, who had a life changing experience with Jesus on the Damascus road. The passage tell us that now the Jews conspired to kill Saul and day and night they kept close watch on the city gates in order to kill him. However Paul's followers took him by night and lowered him in a basket through an opening in the wall and he escaped. When he came to Jerusalem, he tried to join the disciples, but they were all afraid of him, and did not believe that he really was a disciple. However, Barnabas took him and brought him to the apostles and told them of Paul's conversion experience and how in Damascus he had preached fearlessly in the name of Jesus. What we learn is that Barnabas is a risk-taker, putting absolutely everything on the line, his very life is on the line if Paul really is faking it, and his reputation in the church is on the line with the other disciples if Paul is still intent on killing them all. So Paul stayed with them and moved about freely in Jerusalem, speaking boldly in the name of the Lord. Think, what might have happened to Paul without Barnabas' introduction? What might have happened to the history of the church, to the movement of the Gospel to the Gentiles? What might have happened to our Scriptures?

Let me make a point about chronology: dates are notoriously difficult to pinpoint accurately when they are almost 2000 years ago. It is easy to think that these things happen quickly – that Paul meets the disciples in Jerusalem before he then flees back to Tarsus. There are large gaps of time in between these events maybe six or seven years, before we meet Barnabas again in Acts 11:19-26. What is evident is that Barnabas has remained faithful and is growing in his Christian life, with a discerning and encouraging heart that has earned him the trust of the people in the church at Jerusalem. He is obviously in a position of leadership for the church to commission him to go and check out the reports of non-Jewish people coming to believe in Jesus. Barnabas remained firmly rooted in his faith and the good news being for more than just the Jewish people, of which many were sceptical, led Barnabas to be one who was open to God working in new and unexpected ways. He was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and faith, and fruitful in his work for God's Kingdom and so he is the one chosen to go and see about this new phenomenon. Now because of those who had been scattered by the persecution in connection with Stephen, has travelled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus and Antioch, telling the message only to Jews. Some of them, however, from Cyprus and Cyrene, went to Antioch and began to speak to Greeks also, telling them the good news about the Lord Jesus. The Lord's hand was with them, and a great number of people believed and turned to the Lord. It was this news that had reached the ears of the church at Jerusalem, and Barnabas was sent to Antioch. When he arrived and saw the evidence of the grace of God, he was glad and Barnabas encouraged them all to remain true to the Lord with all their hearts.

What Barnabas does after seeing the good things happening in Antioch; excited about all God is doing and realizing that these people need help, need someone who has the background and who can help them understand who Jesus was, who can teach and disciple and encourage, he thinks of Paul, and he goes to Tarsus to try to find him because he is educated as a Jew, met and was transformed by Jesus, is skilled in leading and teaching people and has lived among Gentiles, thus understanding their culture and what the Gospel will mean to them. Barnabas therefore encourages Paul to be involved in

ministry and brings him back to Antioch and also reconnecting him to the church in Jerusalem. For a whole year Barnabas stays with Paul as they meet with the church and taught great numbers of people. These disciples in Antioch were the first be called and given the name 'Christians'.

In Acts 11:28-30 we encounter Barnabas once more encouraging the church at Jerusalem after Agabus predicts a severe famine would spread over the entire Roman world, the disciples, each according to his ability, decided to provide help for the believers living in Judea. This they did, and who do they turn to, to send this offering to encourage the believers back in Jerusalem? Barnabas, the son of encouragement.

In Acts 12:1-3, Barnabas is sent out along with Paul to start new churches. Barnabas is the traveling companion who keeps Paul encouraged in his work. In Acts 15:35-39, Paul says to Barnabas, "Let us go back and visit the believers in all the towns where we preached the word of the Lord and see how they are doing." Barnabas wanted to take John, also called Mark, with them, but Paul did not think it wise to take him, because he had deserted them in Pamphylia and had not continued with them in the work. Barnabas and Paul had such a sharp disagreement and parted company. Barnabas is an encouragement to John Mark, taking him to Cyprus. Barnabas knows Mark has potential. Yes, he has made some mistakes, but Barnabas sticks with him, he doesn't give up on him, encouraging him to be all he could be.

How many of you can think of someone who, at some point in your life, believed in you when you weren't sure you believed in yourself? Someone probably a little older, a little wiser, more experienced, who looked at you and the situation you were in and pulled you aside and said, "You can do this! I know that you can."

Barnabas had the gift of encouragement and he used it for the Lord, and everyone benefited. The body of Christ today is impacted as individual Christians use their gifts. So many times we think that the most important part of any church is the minister. But that is not true, because the growth of the church is not determined by the greatness of the preacher or minister but rather from the individual Christians in the church rising up and ministering to the needs of one another, that's how the church grows. As we consider being apostles of the church today, it's about the need for us to follow Christ and progress in our faithfulness throughout our lives. The call to follow Christ is also the call to serve one another. What is it that God has enabled you to do in a great way? What is your gift? And once you know what it is, ask the question, how am I using my gifts for the sake of the church. Some may be great encouragers, some great listeners, some great givers, some great prayers. Whatever God has blessed you to do, do it for his glory!

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Join now with this **prayer**;

Father God, I take inspiration from the apostles who went before me and I remember Barnabas and how he supported the needy, brought encouragement and enabled your work of abiding love to be known to all in those days after Jesus ascension and the coming of your Spirit in power.

Thank you Father, that you are my God of encouragement, and that I have your indwelling Holy Spirit to help and to comfort me in times of need. Teach me your way and your will, and help me to always heed the gentle promptings of the Spirit of Comfort within my heart. Don't let me give up in any situation I face, but teach me to find the right way and right decision. Let me always feel your love and grace, your caring hand and encouraging support and guide me in all actions I take in my life.

Lord, help me to be an encouragement to others in the same way that you have sent many little encouragements to me along the way. There have been times of weariness and times of fear, times when I have felt ready to give up, but always at the right time there was a short note or a simple call or a little token of your love for me, which you sent by means of the many people that you have lovingly placed in my life. May I not miss an opportunity to be a minister of your encouragement to others in their times of need and may my life point others to you and never to myself. May I decrease as you increase more and more in my life.

Lord, I give thanks to you for those who guide me to face the challenges and opportunities of life. I commend to you those who work in harsh conditions, those who have no work, those whose lives are drab and grey, those whose poor health takes away delight in living, those who are lonely, those who have no home of their own. Grant them the human help and comfort which they need, and the spiritual encouragement which will enable them to live with hope and courage, for the sake of Jesus Christ who leads all to salvation.

I pray for the elderly, asking for them clear faith and human support. I pray for those in middle years, asking for them wisdom in their choices, and the recovery of a sense of wonder. I pray for the young, asking for them good opportunities, and that their ambitions include the desire to serve. I thank you Lord, for your leading, your encouragement, your gifts of educators and teachers, of friends and neighbours who have helped me and encouraged me in the opportunities of life. I give thanks too Lord, for the family and home into which I was born and have been nurtured, grateful for siblings, parents and my children, where we learn to grow and experience all the wonders of this life.

Loving God, I place into your care all our doctors, nurses and healthcare workers. Give them courage of heart and strength of mind and body. Keep them safe from harm. May they know our deep gratitude for all they are doing to heal and help those affected by the coronavirus. God of all consolation may they know your protection and peace. Bless them in these challenging days and bless their families.

O Spirit of God, I pray for those who have lost loved ones, who mourn their passing and feel empty and alone. Help them to know they are not abandoned but are loved by you who offered words of comfort and encouragement when you said, "Come to me, all who labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest!" Help me to keep getting up, to keep following you, to keep hoping, and holding onto the joy and peace that you, Jesus, died to give us all. You are our ultimate source of encouragement and I bring my prayer in your name Jesus and in the words you taught, saying,

Our Father ... Amen.

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**A Hymn** - If ever there was a great hymn of encouragement, it has to be in the words written in 1745 by William Williams, called the "Watts of Wales," born in 1717, at Cefn-y-coed, near Llandovery, Carmarthenshire. The words were translated in English by Peter Williams in 1771. Set to the tune CWM RHONDDA, composed in 1905 by John Hughes of Dowlais, Glamorganshire, Wales.

Guide me, O thou great redeemer,  
Pilgrim through this barren land;  
I am weak, but thou art mighty,  
Hold me with thy powerful hand;  
Bread of heaven, bread of heaven  
Feed me till I want no more;  
Feed me till I want no more.

Open now the crystal fountain  
Whence the healing stream doth flow;  
Let the fire and cloudy pillar  
Lead me all my journey through:  
Strong deliverer, strong deliverer;  
Be thou still my strength and shield;  
Be thou still my strength and shield.

When I tread the verge of Jordan,  
Bid my anxious fears subside;  
Death of death, and hell's destruction  
Land me safe on Canaan's side:  
Songs of praises, songs of praises,  
I will ever give to thee;  
I will ever give to thee.

**A blessing:**

Our blessing is the Irish Blessing, that ancient Celtic blessing of encouragement:-

May the road rise up to meet you.  
May the wind be always at your back.  
May the sun shine warm upon your face;  
the rains fall soft upon your fields  
and until we meet again,  
may God hold you in the palm of His hand. Amen.

