

The Grace of Encouragement

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[0 : 0 0] In the final chapter of the Acts of the Apostles, we read at verse 15, From thence, when the brethren heard of us, they came to meet us as far as at the eye forum and the three caverns, whom, when Paul saw, he thanked God and took courage.

Whom, when Paul saw, he thanked God and took courage. We don't tend to think of Paul as somebody who kind of needs all that much encouragement. He always seems to be kind of the brave and fierce apostle who's happy to list all the things that he's endured and all that he has suffered for the Lord's sake and to put this into his writings and to almost, if we can say it, really boast about how much he has suffered and endured.

And even in this journey to Rome, how he's been shipwrecked in the previous chapter and how he's only just survived within an inch of his life. And yet all the souls in the ship were given unto him, all the 276, I think it was, of all the souls that were on board, likewise spared.

Because, as he says in chapter 27, There stood by me this night the angel of God, whose I am and whom I serve, saying, Fear not, Paul. Thou must be brought before Caesar.

And, lo, God hath given thee all them that sail with thee. So we don't think of him as being necessarily afraid. But I don't know if you can think back, maybe when you were in childhood or whatever, and maybe something bad happens to you, and maybe you sort of tough it out and you're okay, and then you get home to your mum or whatever, and then she asks you what's wrong, and maybe she puts her on her again, and she's nice to you.

[1 : 3 9] Or somebody's nice to you, a friend is nice to you. And that's where, oh, you start blubbing and you start crying. And so you've been able to face the world before, when you need to be tough, when you have the battle.

But then when somebody's nice to you, all your courage just sort of melts away. And I would suggest to you that this is what happens to Paul here. That he is brave, he's toughing it out.

And yet, as he draws near to Rome, there must have been this sense of gathering anxiety. He is coming to what was then the capital of the world.

Yes, he's a citizen of Rome himself. He is a Roman citizen. But all this time he has intended and anticipated and hoped to be in Rome.

We read in the Acts in chapter 19, verse 21, after these things were ended, Paul purposed in the spirit when he had passed through Macedonia and Achaia to go to Jerusalem, saying, after I have been there, I must also see Rome.

[2 : 4 2] And in chapter 23, likewise, at verse 11, the night following the Lord stood by him and said, Be of good cheer, Paul, for as thou hast testified of me in Jerusalem, so must thou bear witness also at Rome.

And just across the page, if you look at Paul's letter to the Romans, which had been written several years earlier, we read from verse 9, For God is my witness, whom I serve with my spirit in the gospel of his Son, that without ceasing I make mention of you always in my prayers, making request, if by any means now at length, I might have a prosperous journey by the will of God to come unto you.

For I long to see you, that I may impart unto you some spiritual gift to the end you may be established. That is, that I may be comforted together with you by the mutual faith, both of you and me.

He wants to go to Rome. He wants to see the Roman Christians. And now, suddenly, it's about to come to pass. He doesn't know yet what kind of reception you'll get there. He doesn't know how it will go when he appears before Caesar.

That this is what he has asked for. And this is what the Lord has caused to come to pass. And yet now, there must be this sense in which he begins to get fearful.

[3 : 58] He begins to get nervous. He's come through all the strife and the shipwreck and all the perils by the journeys and the Jews banding together to try and kill him. All these things he's come through.

And now, having got this far, only less than 50 miles now from Rome and safe on dry land again, with just the journey ahead of him on land, we must take it that something of his courage has begun to ebb away.

Because we read, when Paul saw the Christians, he thanked God and took courage. He thanked the Lord for, possibly you might say, he received his courage, his strength from the Lord.

And he took courage that there was this support, this knowledge, that he wasn't actually alone in the midst of it all. The context, of course, is, as we say, just straight after the shipwreck.

Paul has landed with his fellow travellers after coming to Syracuse at verse 12 there, which, of course, is in eastern Sicily. He was renowned for having two harbours in the ancient world.

[5 : 04] Tarried there three days, so this we fetched a compass and came to Regium, which is sort of in the toe of Italy. And after one day, the south wind blew and we came the next day to Cruteoli.

That is modern day Pozzuoli, which is sort of a port, almost followed up by Naples nowadays, really. But that's where it is, just south of Rome.

It was one of the major ports of Italy. In the days when Britain had an empire, and of course London was the centre of it all, Liverpool, for example, was one of the great port cities.

And an awful lot of transatlantic trade came in and out of Liverpool. Glasgow was another major port. And although Austria was the port of Rome, probably it was limited in the number of people who were allowed to use it.

And Cruteoli was a major granary port where all the grain ships would come in from North Africa, wards and quays and warehouses and so on.

[6 : 04] It was a bustling city. And we read that when he came there to Cruteoli, where we found brethren, verse 14, and were desired to tarry with them seven days, and so we went toward Rome.

Notice this comparative latitude given to Paul here as a Roman citizen. If he decides he wants to stay a week with these brethren, then he's allowed to do so. There's nobody prodding him with a spear saying, no, no, you've got to go on toward Rome.

You're a prisoner. You come with us now. He is allowed to proceed at pretty much his own pace, as long as he keeps on going toward Rome. Now, at Cruteoli, this major port city, we found brethren.

And that's mentioned almost in passing. There's no record of anyone writing to the church at Puteoli. There's no record of anyone visiting the church at Puteoli. And yet there are believers.

There are believers there. There are believers in Tyre. There are believers in Ephesus, in all the different cities scattered throughout the Roman Empire. Almost everywhere Paul goes, there are believers.

[7 : 10] But if there aren't believers before, there certainly are by the time he leaves. So it's not really a surprise that in such a major port city, there would be already Christians there.

And we would have to take it that it's during Paul's time there, that word goes on ahead, that Paul the Apostle has come. And they send on either a runner or somebody with a messenger to tell the Christians and go, Paul's coming.

And so this is how they have this almost derivation coming out to meet him. From this, when the brethren heard of us, they came to meet us as far as Appii Forum.

Now the Appii Forum was on a famous Roman road known as the Appian Way. And this was the oldest of Rome's kind of super highways. You know, historically, we know that the Romans were famous for their very straight roads that they built all over the empire.

But this was the oldest. And in Italy, in terms, the most famous one. And it ran southeast from Rome itself to what you might call the heel of Italy, Brundisium, or Brundissi as it is nowadays.

[8 : 17] And then the idea was that people having gone that far would then cross the narrow, comparatively narrow, stretch of the Adriatic there, and then land at Apollonia in what's now Albania.

And then there was another way called the Ignatian Way that ran all the way from that post all the way through the sort of what is now the border between Greece and Albania or Greece and Bulgaria and Greece and the old Yugoslavia and so on.

Following that route all the way through to the Bosphorus to what is now the Stangro, Byzantium, as it was then. And then, of course, you've got the gateway to Asia. But that Roman road would run all the way across the Ignatian Way, all the way across the top of Greece.

But the Appian Way was actually Italy itself. And it was an ancient way. It took the name from the Roman censor, who had begun it in 312 BC, Appius Claudius Caricus.

So that's a useless piece of information for you, but that's what it takes its name from, Appius Claudius Caricus, the Appian Way. And along the Appian Way, there was the, from Puteoli, there was the Appii Forum.

[9 : 23] The Appii Forum was a marketplace of much commerce and business that was done there. And it was about 43 miles from Rome.

And then the three caverns was another 10 miles around. So about 33 miles from Rome. Now, these aren't just mentioned in the Bible, of course. The ancient Roman poet, Horace, who died around 68 BC, makes mention of the Appii Forum.

And the Roman senator, Cicero, that speaks of a rote of a time when he was writing from the Appii Forum and made reference to a letter that he had begun or started only a few hours earlier at the three taverns.

So these are mentioned in ordinary ancient secular history. So it was a well-known staging post. Both the Appii Forum and the three taverns were well-known staging posts.

So not knowing how long Paul was going to be, perhaps in Puteoli, the Christians in Rome, once they've heard about it, they come out.

[10 : 26] That's 40 plus miles. Some of them are over 40 miles to the Appii Forum. Some of them are over 30 miles to the three taverns. And they stop there because they don't know how long he's going to be, but they know that whenever he does come, he's going to have to come through that way.

He's going to have to come where they are, where they're going to meet him. So they're well-known staging post. Now, coming out to meet Paul as they are, having obviously, as we say, received word during his seven-day stay at Citioli, this was a pattern of greeting one whom it was desired to honour as a visiting dignitary.

Now remember that Paul is effectively in chains. Whether or not he's literally in chains or just metaphorically, he is a prisoner. He is there because he is a prisoner of the Roman state.

So he's not coming as an ambassador. He's not coming with great outward dignity. And yet, the Christians here are greeting him from Rome as though he is a visiting dignitary.

To go out some of the way to meet somebody was to afford them honour. And likewise, of course, the reverse, which Paul had experience of himself, if we're turned back to chapter 20, we'll see that when he was taking his leave of the Ephesian elders in chapter 20 of the Acts of the Apostles, we read in verses 37 and 38, they all wept sore and fell on Paul's neck and kissed him, sorrowing most of all for the words which he spake that they should see his face no more.

[12 : 03] And they accompanied him unto the ship. They went with him the last bit of the way to the ship. Again, in chapter 21, at verse 5, when he's at Tyre, the port of Tyre, another of these places where there's no mention of whether there's a church or not, and yet there are believers there.

We find believers there. And he brought us on our way, verse 5 of chapter 21, on our way with wives and children till we were out of the city and we kneeled down on the shore and prayed.

And when we had taken our leave, one of another, we took ship and they returned home again. But they went some of the way with them. This was the kind of dignified farewell that Paul had had experience of.

But he'd never had experience of being greeted and welcomed in the way in such an honoured and dignified manner. Now, this was a well-known practice.

We have it, for example, if you think of the parables of Jesus, Matthew 25. Then shall the kingdom of heaven be likened unto ten virgins which took their lamps and went forth to meet the bridegroom.

[13 : 12] You know, in weddings in the ancient Middle East, they would go out with their lamps to bring the bridegroom in. And then we do in verse 6. At midnight there was a cry, and behold, the bridegroom cometh, go ye out to meet him.

Likewise, the triumphal entry into Jerusalem. That is what is happening there. Verse 12 of John 12. On the next day much people that were come to the feast, when they heard that Jesus was coming to Jerusalem, took branches of palm trees and went forth to meet him and cried, Hosanna, blessed is the King of Israel that cometh in the name of the Lord.

And when our Lord returns, which we are told infallibly that he will do, 1 Thessalonians 4, verse 17, the Lord himself shall be sent from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, the trump of God, and the dead in Christ shall rise first.

Then we which are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so shall we ever be with the Lord. The sense there is of the Lord's own people going to greet him, going to, as it were, bring him in his triumphal arrival back on earth as the conquering king.

That is the sense of it here. And Paul clearly had not expected any of this kind of reception. His courage may have been going to fail him.

[14 : 36] A wee bit. It may have been sort of draining away as he gets nearer and nearer to Rome, not perhaps knowing what to expect. But here they come to meet him. Forty miles.

They come out to wait upon him and greet him as the apostle that he is. The apostle of the Gentiles coming to the capital of the known world.

And they welcome him in. And again, when he goes ten miles on, there's another group of people waiting to bring him. And there must have been quite a crowd by that stage. They were two separate groups.

And we don't necessarily have to mean they were from different congregations or whatever. It was just people setting off different speeds, different distances they covered. But they're all there wanting to greet him, wanting to welcome him to Rome.

And when he saw that, he thanked God and took courage. As I say, we don't tend to think of Paul as needing courage. But the context would imply that there must have been a certain anxiety.

[15 : 38] As that which he has so long desired draws nearer. Is it going to be everything he hopes? This is a normal human condition. You know, something we might be looking forward to for ages.

And we might be anticipating it with great joy. And yet, and it comes really close and suddenly we're nervous. Suddenly we're anxious and afraid and we need to have our nerves calm. And that's the sense here.

Paul thanked God and took courage. Now, if we were to say, who's giving him the courage? We say, well, obviously God is giving him the courage and that is true up to our point.

The fact that he needs courage, just like if you think of Joshua, chapter one, you know, how many times, is it five times or whatever Joshua is told? You know, be courageous and be strong, be very courageous he keeps saying that to him because he's afraid and because he's weak.

Now, the sense here is, it's not of Paul being afraid but perhaps he doesn't realise just how anxious he is until he receives this courage that yes, it is from God but who is God using in order to give Paul this encouragement?

[16 : 47] To give him, to graft in this additional, he's using ordinary Roman Christians. We are not told any of their names. We don't know how old they were, how young they were, what proportion were men or women or children.

We don't know anything about them. We know some of those to whom Paul writes at the end of Romans about chapter 16 whom he asks to greet. Maybe some of them were there but that's just all speculation. We don't have a clue.

These nameless individuals, all that we know about them is, they are from the brethren at Rome, Christians from Rome, from the capital city of the empire.

They have come out to greet, not the emperor, not a centurion, not a Roman legion coming and trying to greet Paul, the prisoner in chains, the apostle of the Gentiles and when he sees them, he takes courage and thanks God.

They are given the grace of encouragement, perhaps without ever knowing just what a difference their encouragement makes here to Paul.

[17 : 57] They often feel that encouragement is a grace which, it's like we give it out as a seed, but it's received as a harvest. Most of the time I imagine those from whom we receive the most encouragement, whether a word or whether a letter you didn't expect or whatever it might be or just a smile and a kind word, whatever, people don't have a clue just how much they are giving.

And I can just bore you with a personal anecdote. Just to give an illustration of this, years ago when I was a youngster, I wasn't just a wee boy, but a young teenager, sort of 13, 14, maybe 15 at the most, that kind of age when you're just awkward.

You know, you're not quite confident enough in adulthood. You're not just a child anymore, you're just at that awkward teenage stage where you're so conscious of your own image or appearance or your own feeling of anxiety in the world and you're just desperate not to stick out like a sore thumb with the fitting and so on.

Well, it so happened on this one day that I was in our usual church in our usual role. Our church had chairs set out in different sections and our section that we normally sat in was going to side on to the rest of the church, kind of at an angle.

And always in that role, we had sat, my mum, my dad, and my sisters, and me and other people if they came on the end of the row or whatever, would sit in that room and other chairs behind us and then there'd be a section side on to us.

[19 : 27] And this day, after my sisters had gone, left home, done off to university, I think my dad was on duty doing collection or something like that and mum was probably helping with Sunday school. It was just me that day in that row and I went and sat down in the usual place plumped at the end of the row and it was early on so there wasn't too many people coming in yet so you didn't think anything about it.

And folk came in, the couples are the usual people and so on and older folk and so on and they would nod and smile as they came past but then they'd go and sit in the places that they usually sat behind me. And others would come in at the side and they would smile and say hello.

Gradually as a church filled up, I in my sort of teenage anxiety and I was there's this row here and I'm sitting and plumped at the end of it. People were hiding there's people at the side. Nobody wants to sit next to me.

I'm beginning to panic and I'm going to think that I'm sort of outcast and nobody is coming near me and more people go past and smile and say hello and they go and sit somewhere else and I'm starting to think everybody's looking at me.

Everybody's looking oh he wants to sit next to that guy or something really wrong with him. Obviously he's weird, obviously he's strange or they weren't thinking any of the kind. Probably. But it was just my usual role it was just the usual place they knew who I was and this still happened my folks weren't there that day but you begin to panic.

[20 : 41] You're a teenager you think everybody's looking at you you think oh your images are all wrong just minutes before the service began. One of the elders happened to come in.

We didn't have separate sitting places for the elders unless they were on duty. Happened to come in obviously looked at all the filled places behind and he came in right to the road where I left right to the end sat down plunk right beside me.

His name was Mr. McFarman. I don't know what his spiritual state was to be honest. It was quite a liberal church I grew up in but nearly 40 years later I have never forgotten it because suddenly instead of being kind of outcast leper colony everybody staring at this person on their own suddenly it was okay.

Suddenly I was affirmed I was approved and somebody had sat down next to me one of the elders one of the leading out there I was I was okay now and everything was fine for the rest of the service and if you said to him do you know what you did for that he said well no not what I did he went and sat down and said yes so what about it he wouldn't have given it a thought I doubt if he even knew by the end of the service what he had done but nearly 40 years later he saved my bacon you could say he saved my my absolute paranoia from bubbling over and making me want to shrink into the chair dig a hole and just crawl into it because I was convinced everybody was just staring at me sitting at the end of my road he came and sat down and it was all solved and all sorted and that's all it took he would never know to his dying days I didn't know the courage to tell him what he'd done or the difference that he'd made and I never mentioned it to anybody else in the family because I was embarrassed about it and so on how I'd been feeling but at the same time that encouragement never left me and yes in later years

I thought yeah you were being a bit stupid but who cares if you were sitting by yourself in your usual world that day it doesn't really matter but at that time it mattered it mattered a huge amount and you just never know whether when you say something kindly to somebody or you cross the street to speak to them or maybe you give them a smile it used to be a sign in our own old church you know a smile costs nothing but gives much it enriches those who receive without impoverishing those who give it it doesn't cost you anything in other words and so often the encouragement that we throw like a little seed it costs us almost nothing but it can give a huge amount to the person who receives it because we just never know what condition that little seed might find them in we do not know just what the soil might be that receives that seed that as far as they're concerned sprouts into a whole bushel we throw it in as a seed you don't think anything of it but what they receive from that little bit of encouragement might make the difference between meaning they can face the world or wanting to crawl into a hole and die

[23 : 50] I'm not just thinking of my own sort of paranoid experience as a young teenager I'm thinking of lots of people in lots of situations you just never know the difference that a wee note you might peg to somebody a little card you might send them a little conversation a little smile a little invitation here or there you just never know what difference it might make now it says elsewhere in the scripture I haven't got the reference right in front of you but it mentions about don't hesitate to entertain strangers look after those who say because thereby some have entertained angels unawares and because they're doing that which is kind for the stranger who cannot pay them back the Lord sees it all think again we talked about Matthew 25 earlier and remember towards the end of that chapter how the Lord says you know well I was hungry and you gave me food I was thirsty you gave me drink I was in prison you visited me and all the ones who say when did we do that we don't have any recollection of that at all we don't even think about it like Mr.

McFarlane coming and sitting down next to me with no recollection of the difference that he made to a wee boy a young boy's life and those who give the good don't think anything about it they don't think oh yes you're right Lord we are good people we did that little bit we praise you nine times out of ten if you think something's a big deal to the person who receives it it won't be and if you think it's nothing and you think well it's just a doorway thing it's a little thing we're able to do it can make a huge amount of difference but to then I did to them that did and this is what we have here in this verse 15 we don't actually read that these people coming out this 40 and 30 miles made a difference to how Paul was received in Rome we don't read that it made a difference to how the Jews received his message when he asked them and invited them to his house and expounded to them the gospel and so on we don't read that it made a difference to how he was received by Caesar but it made a huge difference to his own personal courage whom when

Paul saw he thanked God and took courage who were they we don't know we're not told their names we're not told whether so-and-so who was one of the deacons or the bishops or the leaders at Rome he came and all his family doesn't say that or so many of the elders they were there doesn't say that or the rich believers from Rome they were there doesn't say that we don't know what kind of believers they were whether the rich are poor or bishops or deacons or elders or whatever they might be we don't know anything about them we're simply not told except that they came they came to meet us as far as the Apidite Forum 43 miles out and the three taverns 33 miles out two separate groups at least meeting Paul along the way welcoming him to Rome changing up welcoming him in the condition that he arrives and when he saw them he thanked God and took courage yes it is

God who gives the courage and yes it is God who perhaps had caused Paul when he saw them perhaps to melt a little in his heart and perhaps some of his courage to fail him because that's what they say when people are nice to it sometimes sometimes just unlocks all the emotion inside and he thanked God and he took courage now God gives the courage but God uses these nameless individuals nameless nondescript God I'm sure will know every single one of them we don't know anything about any of them but we know the difference that their encouragement made we know the difference that it made to Paul we know that the impression that it clearly made upon Luke who is the writer inspired by the Holy Ghost of course but under God Luke was the writer of the Acts of the Apostles he records for posterity of the courage that Paul took when he met these nameless believers from Rome whom he had long since desired to meet and now at last he is meeting them and it is what he has prayed for and longed for verse 10 of Romans 1 that I might have a prosperous journey by the will of

God to come unto you well it's not the way he imagined he would come to them in Rome as a prisoner being summoned before Caesar pleading for his life but this is how he comes this is how the Lord brings it about and the reception of these Roman believers changes Paul's heart completely whom when Paul saw he thanked God and he took courage and obviously it's not just something happening internally that he keeps bottled up because Luke is writing it down it means that Luke is aware of it it means that he knows he can see he can sense the change in Paul the difference that this meeting these two separate meetings have made to Paul encouragement as we say is a grace which may be given out as a seed but it may well be received and gathered in by the recipient as a harvest so you must we must as followers of Jesus give it if we can yes to one another it's amongst fellow Christians it's being given here give it if you can but not just to believers perhaps the kindness or perhaps the encouragement shown by a

[29 : 33] Christian to somebody who's not a Christian might just be that which piques their interest and makes them wonder why is it you're nice to people like this why are you being kind to me like this what's in it for you well nothing's in it for me well why are you showing all this well because that's what Jesus teaches us to do who's Jesus you just never know the difference that will be made when the seed is scattered given out as a little seed perhaps received in as a harvest this the grace of encouragement which gives grace of the grace of God and the grace of God and he thanked God and took courage the people Paul received the courage from under God the people that God used we do not know who they are we will never know until we get to eternity who they were but God will know each one of them and God will have used each one of them in this purpose to strengthen his apostle for his ongoing work until the time when the Lord appoints that it is complete but for now he needs strength for now he needs courage and God sends the people to get it and they probably have no clue just how much courage they are giving just how much encouragement they are restoring they are just doing what to them is a very little thing that costs them precious but it was maybe a day's journey maybe two days depending how far they walked and then they get on with their lives maybe they didn't remember it other than oh yes that day when Paul came yes we went out to see him I remember or an old man away he said with a small boy there was a little girl that day we went to meet

Paul yeah but that was it they got on with the rest of their lives after that it was just just the work of the day and yet it is recorded here for posterity not only that they did it but the effect that it had upon God's apostle whom when Paul saw he thanked God and took courage we must never underestimate the grace because that's what grace means gratis free gift the grace of encouragement which the Lord may enable us to give but which is ultimately a gift and a grace from them being willing to use us to spread it to others to one another as fellow believers or perhaps to others who are not believers yet or who may never become believers but that doesn't affect our duty and our requirement to spread that which we have first received that others may receive it and be encouraged and give thanks to the Lord bye to subscribe