

THE POWER OF ENCOURAGEMENT

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Theme: People and families need encouragement. God's grace is a mighty fountain of encouragement meant to be shared. Christians are chosen and privileged to pass it on wherever their lives touch the lives of others.

Setting: The following seminar is adaptable for adults or for use as a multigenerational experience in a variety of settings. It is suitable for a church retreat, a family camp, a Sabbath afternoon presentation, a Family Enrichment Seminar, etc. Presentation Helps are provided for the leader(s) and group exercises and other handouts are found at the end of the materials.

Objectives:

- To explore the biblical concept of encouragement.
- To apply the biblical concept of encouragement in practical ways to the family and church setting.
- To experience the power of encouragement personally in the seminar setting.

Introduction

In the pages of the New Testament there's a story recorded of a man whose name was Encouragement. That wasn't his real name. His real name was Joseph. He was given the name Encouragement by the disciples.

Our first glimpse of this man comes in Acts 4, that chapter which speaks so joyfully of the unity, the sharing, the common life of the early church. Barnabas is a man who knows the joy the Good News ignites in the heart. Life is filled with hustle, bustle and stress for Barnabas as one of the elite estate owners on the emerald isle of Cyprus. Multiplying and protecting his investments, combined with the usual round of social obligations required of the wealthy, occupies his every faculty. Then he meets Jesus, and everything is changed.

Material wealth is no longer important. The Bible says that Barnabas is now absorbed with one desire—to spread the Good News about Jesus and strengthen His church. With no more than a passing thought, he puts his choice real estate up for sale. And when it is sold, he brings the large sum as an offering. What an encouragement to a fledgling church, scarcely recovered from the dramatic closing scenes of Jesus' ministry on earth, and now facing desperate financial straits and imminent persecution.

In the next glimpse of Barnabas which Scripture provides, we witness the immediate aftermath of Saul's dazzling conversion on the road to Damascus. After the visit from Ananias, Saul preaches with astonishingly convincing arguments that Jesus is indeed the Messiah. Immediately the Jews are stirred to plot his death. After a harrowing escape over the city wall in a basket, Saul seeks

refuge with the brethren in Jerusalem. But open arms do not await him! The disciples are confused and frightened. They will have nothing to do with this "former" tormenter of Christians. You can imagine their conversations among themselves. "Slim chance the likes of him could really change! We can't be too cautious. What if this is a clever ploy to attack the church from the inside!"

Then Barnabas reappears. Barnabas, the kind, perceptive man who possesses the rare gift of seeing the best in others. Barnabas, the one who is always eager to minimize faults, quick to recognize potential, confident of the changing power of an encounter with Jesus. It is Barnabas who brings Saul to the brethren. He does not hesitate to hazard his own good name and reputation on this risky newcomer to the faith. By expressing confidence and trust in Saul, Barnabas opens the way for his acceptance at Headquarters.

In Acts 11 we find Barnabas being sent to reinforce pioneering efforts in the city of Antioch. Generous-hearted, good-natured, sympathetic, full of faith and the Holy Spirit are the words the Bible uses to describe him. Just the kind of person who could take a small group of scattered believers and draw them together into a strong body. Upon arrival, Barnabas finds a real opportunity to make a name for himself. Conditions were ripe for harvest. The numbers would be impressive on his report to Headquarters.

But Barnabas is not concerned with boosting his own reputation. He has been freed by Christ from any concern over who gets the credit. Quickly he surveys the situation. Then he goes to find Saul to bring him to Antioch where he perceives their combined strengths and efforts will be most fruitful for God. Is it any wonder that under such leadership an evangelistic explosion ensues, and there is so much talk of it around town that the popular name for the believers sticks and begins to spread? For the Bible says they were first called Christians in Antioch.

As the threads of the story pick up again, Paul and Barnabas have completed their work in Antioch and have been requested to carry relief money from the Christians there to the believers in Jerusalem now under heavy persecution. James has been killed by the sword and Peter is in prison, slated for execution.

The third character in this drama enters the picture on the night of Peter's release from prison by the angel. Finding himself alone on the dark streets of Jerusalem, Peter hastens to the home of Mary, a prominent Christian woman in Jerusalem, sister of Barnabas, and mother of John Mark. In the excitement of the next few days, with the church leaders clustered in Jerusalem, Paul and Barnabas are specially set aside as missionaries and announce their plans for a missionary journey. Barnabas may even have been staying in Mary's home, and his contagious enthusiasm for sharing the Good News infects the young lad John Mark, who now wants more than anything to join them on their journey.

The Bible is quite sketchy here, but in the tale which unfolds, Barnabas' gifts stand in stark contrast to Paul's. It seems that after some good experiences on the Isle of Cyprus, the stresses and strains of missionary work on the front lines are too much for John Mark. Inexperienced and discouraged, he just quits and goes home. This did not set well with Paul. In fact, one of the most intense conflicts recorded in the Book of Acts centers around the opening scenes of Paul's second missionary journey. Paul suggests to Barnabas that they revisit the cities where they have preached to see how their converts are doing. Barnabas is enthusiastic and wants to take John Mark again.

Barnabas has watched John Mark mature since their first trip. He sees potential in this young man for strong leadership in the church long after men like Paul and himself have passed off the scene. With a heart full of understanding and forgiveness, and knowing the value of experience with a seasoned missionary, Barnabas is ready to give John Mark another chance. The feelings run hot between Barnabas and Paul. Ultimately Paul, unable to forgive and forget, unable to recognize and affirm growth in John Mark, chooses another companion and departs.

And Barnabas? Barnabas unobtrusively moves out of Scripture's limelight as partner to the dynamic evangelist Paul and makes his way back to Cyprus with the young John Mark. Notice how he first takes Mark back to the place where experiences had been good before. There courage and confidence can be built for the challenges which lay ahead. In this gracious, unselfish gesture, Barnabas opens the way for Mark to become the first gospel writer, a powerful leader in the church, a close friend to Peter, and ultimately, even a respected friend to Paul. It's not hard to understand why the disciples changed his name from Joseph to Barnabas—which means Encouragement!

[The story of Barnabas is drawn from Acts 4:36; 9:26-27; 11:22-26; 12:25; 13:5-6, 13; 15:37-39.]

[Group Exercise. Divide into groups of four and allow a few minutes for group members who wish to share to tell stories of people in their lives like Barnabas who have been sources of great encouragement. When the large group reconvenes, ask for a couple of volunteers to share their stories with the entire group.]

A Definition: The Concise Oxford Dictionary defines "encouragement" in the sense we are talking about today as "giving courage to" or "to stimulate by help or reward." The Hebrew word for encouragement, *chazaq*, also means "to strengthen."

A Word On Encouragement From Thessalonica

[Distribute [Handout # 1](#).] Read 1 Thessalonians 5:12-21 responsively.

[Exercise. Divide into small groups and give each group one of the [Encouragement Worksheets](#) (See #s 1-4) and the discussion questions which accompany them. If the group is large, you may wish to have several copies of each discussion sheet so that more than one group can be working on the same text and questions. Allow approximately 15 minutes for discussion. Encourage each group to keep some notes of their ideas. Bring the discussion to a close while interest is still high rather than waiting for enthusiasm to fade. Take time for each group to share some of their best ideas.]

Ellen White on Encouragement

Ellen White also highlights the importance of encouragement in the family and in the church family. [Distribute [Handout # 2](#) and invite several members of the group to read the selected Ellen White quotations on encouragement. You may wish to suggest that families cut these quotes apart and place them around the house—on the refrigerator, on a mirror, etc. as reminders.]

A Warning Against Criticism

Notice the devastating effect when encouragement is absent:
Self will ever cherish a high estimate of self. As men lose their first love, they do not keep the commandments of God, and then they begin to criticize one another. This spirit will constantly be striving for the mastery to the close of time. Satan is seeking to foster it in order that the brethren in their ignorance may seek to devour one another. God is not glorified but greatly dishonored; the Spirit of God is grieved. Satan exults, because he knows that if he can set brother to watch brother in the church and in the ministry some will be so disheartened and discouraged as to leave their posts of duty. This is not the work of the Holy Spirit; a power from beneath is working in the chambers of the mind and in the soul temple to place his attributes where the attributes of Christ should be (Testimonies to Ministers, p. 189).

Two Poignant Illustrations

The story is told of an old gentleman who once came to visit the great painter Rosetti. He wanted to show him some sketches and drawings to see if they were of any artistic value. Rosetti had to be honest, but as gently as possible he told the old man that there was no real evidence of talent in the sketches. The old man was obviously disappointed, but understanding.

As he picked up to leave, he turned and asked Rosetti if he had another moment to look at some drawings by a young art student. Rosetti agreed. As he looked through the drawings, Rosetti's face lit up. This was talent! "Who is this young man?" he asked. "He should be given every opportunity to develop his skills and all the encouragement possible toward a career in art!" At these words, the old man became deeply emotional. "Is this young artist your son?" Rosetti inquired.

"No," said the old man. "These are my drawings, forty years ago. If only I could have heard your words of encouragement then. The other drawings you have just seen are the work of an old man who became discouraged and gave up too soon." But consider another story.

Young Benjamin was left at home one day to babysit his little sister Sally. While his mother was out, he found some bottles of ink and pens and began to sketch Sally's portrait. He was so enthusiastic about what he was doing that he didn't notice the ink blots scattering around him. When his mother came home, ink had already begun to stain the floor, chairs and table. [If Benjamin were your son, how would you feel like responding? Request responses from the group.]

Benjamin's mother took in the whole situation in one glance. Finally her eyes settled on the picture Benjamin had drawn. "Why, it's Sally!" she exclaimed with delight, and she bent down and kissed her young son.

In 1763, when Benjamin West was 25 years old, he was chosen to be King George III's history painter and went on to become one of the greatest artists of his day. When asked what had encouraged him to become a painter, he said, "It was my mother's kiss that day when I painted Sally's picture. Her encouragement did more than a rebuke could ever have done!" Such is the awesome power of encouragement!

Conclusion

[Exercise. Stick a postcard-sized card on the back of every person in the group. Provide each person with a pen or pencil. Give individuals time to move through the group and write one-sentence encouragement notes and words of appreciation on the back of as many as they can. Ask everyone to make sure that each person has at least six encouraging comments on their card. Take a moment for each person to read their encouragement card at the end.]

Offer your own words of appreciation to the group for their participation and support as you close.

References

White, E. G. (1923). *Testimonies to ministers and gospel workers*. Boise, ID. Pacific Press Publishing Association.

White, E. G. (1952). *The Adventist home*. Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald Publishing Association.

Additional Group Exercises

Bible Study. Study John, chapters 14-17. Count the number and the ways in which Jesus encourages his friends during their last evening together, knowing they will be facing very hard times.

Wish Gifts. Give each person a piece of white typing paper and the name of another person in the group. Then let each person make a symbolic gift out of the paper to give to that person. The paper can be folded, torn, rolled, etc. to create a gift. Encourage the group to think of special needs or desires that they might wish to respond to with their gifts. For example, a young person headed off to college might like a "billfold full of dollars." Or a person with family on another continent might like an "airplane." Most anyone would like a "heart full of love."

All in a Name. Have each person in the group write their first or last name down the side of a piece of paper. Pass the papers around the group, with each person filling in an encouraging thought or a word of appreciation beginning with one letter in a person's name. When each letter in the name has been filled, pass the names back to their owners.