

13th Sun. after Pent.
Sept. 11, 2011

Encouraged through the Gospel

Pastor Michael Ewart
1 Samuel 2:18-21

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

Today, as you know, is 9/11... the 10th anniversary of the day when America was attacked by terrorists. Thousands of people died. I bet every one of you can tell me exactly what you were doing the moment you first heard about the attack. The way God made us, the stronger the emotion attached with an event or information, the better we remember it. There are probably few times as emotional as that time when the planes hit the Twin Towers.

Our situation was unusual. I was a missionary in Russia at the time. Living in Siberia, we were exactly 12 time zones from the U.S. Central Time. It was about 10 minutes to 8 in the evening when a fellow missionary family called us and said, "Is your TV on?" I said, "No, why?" "Turn it on now! We'll call you later." I turned on the TV trying to absorb quickly what was going on. The first plane had hit. The other, not quite yet. As we stood there watching on live television in Siberia the unfolding events, we saw that second plane hit." I remember how surreal it all felt. I kept thinking, "This can't really be happening!" But it was. We stayed up late that night, watching the news unfold.

The memory is still vivid. I know yours is too. What a discouraging event (to say the least) in American history. Friends tell me that churches were full for the next few weeks. Why was that? Did people need a word of encouragement as they came to grips with the fact that we don't know how long we have on this earth?

We all need encouragement in our lives. Truth is all of us need encouragement. Life has challenges, obstacles and setbacks... things that really discourage us, bring us down and make us want to give up. They're not all 9/11 discouragements, but they bring us down just the same. What do we need most when we're struggling? Encouragement.

Here's some good news: God gives the gift of encouragement to believers. Encourage someone means *to go to someone's side to comfort, console, entreat, implore or counsel*. It is an ability from God to be able to go alongside someone to help, so strengthen the weak, to reassure the wavering, to steady the faltering, to console the troubled. It's an important gift to have and use. And while all of us can encourage others, God gives a special gift of encouragement to just some believers. Do you have that gift? Let's look at it in more detail.

Today I'd like to recall with you the story of Hannah and explore her gift of encouragement. Hannah was a believer who carried a heavy burden. She had been unable to have any children. Besides herself, her husband had another wife. The other wife was able to have children. But Hannah was ashamed that she could have none. More than anything else in the world, she just wanted to have a son.

Her husband tried to encourage her. He told her that she meant more to him than 10 sons! What a beautiful thing for him to say to his wife when she was discouraged.

But those words we little comfort to Hannah. She still wanted a son. Being a believing woman, because she wanted a son desperately, she prayed about it earnestly. She said to God, "**Lord, give me a son. Give me a son and I will give him to you. I will dedicate his life to serving you.**" Did you notice something with that request? As much as she wanted a son, her

love for the Lord was even greater. If God chose to give her a son, she promised she would dedicate him to the Lord and serve the Lord with his whole life.

God heard her prayer and she became pregnant. Imagine her joy and the joy of her husband to discover this fact! When the boy was born, she named him Samuel... a name that means, "Heard of God."

But the promise to dedicate his life to service to the Lord remained. Samuel remained with his mother until he was weaned, which in that culture was probably three or four years old. And then Hannah kept the promise she made to the Lord. Hannah went to the temple of the Lord where the priest, Eli, was. Eli would raise the boy in the temple. Samuel would grow up serving the Lord in the temple. I wonder what was going through her mind when she turned her son over to Eli.

I wonder what she thought as she made the long journey home, knowing she wouldn't see her son for a year. You might think she had a heavy heart. You might think there was even a bit of bitterness... maybe even some bitterness toward God. But listen to what she prayed: **"My heart rejoices in the Lord; in the Lord my horn is lifted high. My mouth boasts over my enemies, for I delight in your deliverance."** How could Hannah rejoice at a time like this? What gave her comfort and encouragement? Was it that a priest would raise her child, and so naturally he would be good at it and conscientious? No, that wasn't it. Eli was actually a permissive, indulgent father, who did a horrible job raising his own sons. His sons didn't hesitate to take the best of the offerings for their own use and benefit. So that wouldn't have brought her any joy. It was this: *The Lord's deliverance*. Her source of joy was in the Lord. She knew her God was a God who cared, who listened, and who was powerful to answer. And knowing that's the kind of God who rules the universe, she had no doubts that her son would be just fine in the temple. God would be with him and bless him. When she herself needed encouragement, she found it in the Lord and in his promises.

But she was also one who gave encouragement. Every year she went to the temple with her husband to offer sacrifices. That meant every year she would get to see her son. When she went she would encourage him. Each year she would bring him a new robe. It was the robe he would wear as he served the Lord in the temple. She encouraged him in his service to the Lord, even as Eli's sons were making a sinful mess out of service to the Lord.

Hannah's continuous encouragement to her son was not in vain. Samuel went on to become one of the greatest prophets of the Lord. At God's direction he picked kings for Israel, and anointed them to their special service for the Lord. God spoke to Samuel, and guided Israel through Samuel. He was greatly respected in the land of Israel. A little motherly encouragement goes a long way.

Friends, who needs encouragement today?

- 1) We all do, don't we? Before we can give encouragement, don't we need to receive it? Maybe the memory of 9/11 has you discouraged. Or maybe it's something you're dealing with in your life. Is there a certain moral failing in which you let someone down, yourself down and your God down... does that have you discouraged? Or maybe you're the one who let someone else down? Is your relationship with someone strained right now, causing you to be discouraged? Have some big expenses put you in debt, and that debt is crushing you? Is the struggling economy in general have you concerned and worried? What is it in your life that's causing you to just limply drop your hands at your side and sapping you of your strength?

When we need encouragement, first let's turn to our Lord. That's what Hannah did when she was greatly discouraged because she couldn't have a son. She took her need to God, and God delivered her. God did something about her hopeless situation. And know this, dear Christian. God helps you just the same. Your sins have left you helpless and discouraged. But your God has not abandoned you in your need. Confess your sins to him, and know this: He removed your sin-debt in full. That which separates you from him, therefore causing endless discouragement... is fixed and forgiveness. God encourages you today by telling you that his Son lived for you. His Son died for you. His Son rose again. And this means you are a child of God and heaven is your home.

You know what Hannah knew! Our God is a God that delivers. So do what Hannah did! Rejoice, no matter what the circumstances, for you God lives, he reigns and he loves you. And second, now go and encourage others who need encouraging.

- 2) Encourage others. I feel sorry for the unbelievers of this world. They have nothing with which to truly encourage others. Their words of encouragement must necessarily be empty. "Everything is going to be all right." Really? Says who? How do you know? Maybe it won't be! Empty encouragement.

But the believer truly has words of encouragement to share. For we know who the true God is. We know what he's done for us. We know his power and majesty. We know he's coming again. And we know his promises: All things will work for the good of those who love him. It will work out for good. An empty wish! No! A sure promise backed by none other than Almighty God, creator of heaven and earth. Even when death comes knocking at our door, we need not be afraid. It is simply the means through which God grants us the greatest and best deliverance. He takes us from this world of sorrows to himself in the glories and perfection of heaven.

Over 50 years ago, a freak accident happened. A speeding motorboat bounced on a wave, and shot two of its passengers up and out of the boat. One was a 50 year old man, the other was a little girl. To keep that girl from drowning, that man held her up, keeping her head above water while the boat swung around. He spent his strength though. The girl was rescued, but he slipped beneath the waves. He drowned. That man was Dawson Trotman, a Christian and the founder of an international discipleship ministry. A quote from Time magazine said, "He lived to save others. His death was just the way he would have planned it." In part his obituary read, "Dawson Trotman: always lifting someone up."

Friends, would you be an encourager today? Would you be someone who lifts someone else up? As you do so, you could be saving their life. Could you find someone who might be discouraged today, and just remind them of God's love for us in Christ Jesus? And if you have a special gift from God of encouraging, would you use it frequently and freely? We need you. Christ's church needs you. Use the gift God has given you.

On this 9/11, I pray you don't go home discouraged, but encouraged. God is still in control. You are still his child. And heaven is still your home. Go now and encourage someone with this good news which you have received. Amen.