

Our God Saves: Believe

Encouragement for the Godly

Isaiah 51

Mark Vroegop

“Listen to me, you who know righteousness, the people in whose heart is my law; fear not the reproach of man, nor be dismayed at their revilings. For the moth will eat them up like a garment, and the worm will eat them like wool, but my righteousness will be forever, and my salvation to all generations.”
Awake, awake, put on strength, O arm of the LORD; awake, as in days of old, the generations of long ago. Was it not you who cut Rahab in pieces, who pierced the dragon? Was it not you who dried up the sea, the waters of the great deep, who made the depths of the sea a way for the redeemed to pass over? And the ransomed of the LORD shall return and come to Zion with singing; everlasting joy shall be upon their heads; they shall obtain gladness and joy, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away. “I, I am he who comforts you; who are you that you are afraid of man who dies, of the son of man who is made like grass, and have forgotten the LORD, your Maker, who stretched out the heavens and laid the foundations of the earth, and you fear continually all the day because of the wrath of the oppressor, when he sets himself to destroy? And where is the wrath of the oppressor? He who is bowed down shall speedily be released; he shall not die and go down to the pit, neither shall his bread be lacking. I am the LORD your God, who stirs up the sea so that its waves roar— the LORD of hosts is his name. And I have put my words in your mouth and covered you in the shadow of my hand, establishing the heavens and laying the foundations of the earth, and saying to Zion, ‘You are my people’” (Isa. 51:7–16, ESV).

Today I want to invite you to think about the word “encouragement.”

In the Bible, the word encouragement can also mean “to comfort, to cheer up, to console, to speak in a friendly manner, or someone to simply be with you.”¹ Encouragement includes the idea of increasing someone’s courage. There’s something about encouragement that provides energy, produces enthusiasm, or creates hope for endurance.

One of my annual traditions is to run the Drumstick Dash on Thanksgiving Day. And besides the joy of the exercise and participating in it with family and friends, it’s always fascinating to see the people who line the city streets to provide encouragement. In my mind I can see little kids bundled up, people sitting in lawn chairs with their warm coffee, and complete strangers holding signs. I can hear their cheers in my head: “You’re doing great!” “Keep going.” “Nice job everyone!”

¹ <https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/the-surprising-ministry-of-encouragement>

Do you know what's funny about that? These people don't know me. I don't know them. I'll probably never see them again. But it helps. I mean, I would keep running without their encouragement, but those words of affirmation from complete strangers actually help.

My body is telling me: "This is dumb. You can hardly breathe. You are old. You're fat. You're waddling like a duck. It hurts. When is this over?" And then a six-year-old says, "Good job!" And I believe him! I keep going. I don't even know him. He doesn't really know if I'm doing a good job. But it doesn't matter because my need for encouragement is so great, that I'll take it from anyone.

You know that you need encouragement, don't you?

In fact, part of the reason we gather together on the Lord's Day is to encourage one another. The book of Hebrews makes this clear:

And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near (Heb. 10:24–25).

But how does encouragement work for you? What are the ways that help you keep perspective, cheer you up, or empower you to keep going? Maybe something like:

- Time with a friend who understands
- A thoughtful note, text message, or card
- A gift that is meaningful
- A few days of rest or a good night of sleep
- Gaining perspective or a small "win"

Regardless of what your "love language" of encouragement looks like, I think we would all agree that encouragement is really important. It's safe to say that no one is suffering from too much encouragement.²

Isaiah 51 is a chapter designed to provide encouragement to God's people as they face the tensions and challenges of exile. The circumstances of their lives could create a narrative in their minds and hearts regarding God's love and care for them. This chapter is designed to reorient what they are listening to and what they are looking for.

True encouragement comes from listening to the right message and looking for true hope. We'll look at this passage by asking ourselves two questions as they relate to the issue of encouragement: 1) Are you listening and 2) Are you looking?

I hope that you'll leave with a greater sense of encouragement in light of what we find in Isaiah 51.

² Ibid.

1. Are You Listening?

Biblical encouragement comes from listening to the right source. Often the foundation of our discouragement is due to the fact that we are living in light of what wrong or unhelpful sources of information.

Isn't this how sin entered the world in the first place? Eve's first mistake, in Genesis 3, was listening and believing the lie of Satan in the Garden of Eden. The Devil first cast doubt on what Eve heard God say, "Did God actually say you shall not eat of any tree in the garden?" And then he cast doubt on God's intentions: "You will not surely die. For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God."

Mark this down somewhere in your head. We're in trouble not just when we believe the Devil's lies, but also when we start doubting God's intentions.

You probably know this from a broken relationship in your life. When you trace it back, the person wasn't directly opposing you at first. Maybe something was discouraging, but before long they started to doubt everything. A narrative formed in their head. And the relationship was headed the wrong direction. Be careful with internal narratives that spring from discouragement!

Isaiah desires to provide encouragement through inviting God's people to listen to what is really true. That's why we see the theme of listening emerge in three places:

"Listen to me, you who pursue righteousness, you who seek the LORD: look to the rock from which you were hewn, and to the quarry from which you were dug" (Isa. 51:1).

"Give attention to me, my people, and give ear to me, my nation; for a law will go out from me, and I will set my justice for a light to the peoples" (Isa. 51:4).

"Listen to me, you who know righteousness, the people in whose heart is my law; fear not the reproach of man, nor be dismayed at their revilings" (Isa. 51:7).

Think of this as the way that you would try to encourage a family member or a friend who is emotionally stuck because of what's going on in his or her head. You might say, "Hey listen to me. I'm your friend. This is what I know about you..." That's what Isaiah is trying to do here...but with God.

The chapter begins by addressing the faithful remnant (v.1) – "you who pursue righteousness, you who seek the Lord." The goal here is to keep reminding them who they really are so that they will remain faithful to the end. Sometimes we think it's only rebellious people who need encouragement, but in this text it's the most godly who need it.

Scott Sauls in his blog post "The Uplifting Potential of our Words" says:

{The} nineteenth century Scottish minister, Robert Murray McCheyne, said that for every look we take at ourselves, we should take ten looks at Christ. Similarly, Martin Luther said

that we need to hear the gospel every day because we forget it every day. These are simply ways of saying that most of us have the volume turned way up on the serpent's voice of accusation and bondage and turned way down on the Father's voice of pardon and freedom. We must reverse this.

In verses 1-2, Isaiah reminds the people of God about **their identity**. He points them back to the foundation of their life ("the quarry from which you were dug"). Abraham and Sarah are referenced here because they are the patriarchs from whom the promise of God flowed. They are the children of Abraham, but even more, they are the children of God's covenant.

Verse 3 is a beautiful reassurance. Notice that God promises comfort, transformation, and joy. This is what encouragement sounds like: "God is going to help us. He'll make everything right. We'll be happy again."

If you've ever walked through a dark season, battled depression, or muddled your way through grief you know that these are the kind of promises that you need to rehearse. Even if you are mature and godly, you still need to remind yourself about these promises and this reality.

Verses 4-6 invite the people of God to listen to a message about **God's power**. We see words like "law," "justice," "righteousness," "salvation," and "judge." God has a plan for the world, and it will not be thwarted.

In 1958, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. wrote:

Evil may so shape events that Caesar will occupy a palace and Christ a cross, but that same Christ arose and split history into A.D. and B.C., so that even the life of Caesar must be dated by his name. Yes, "the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice."³

This text invites us to keep our perspective. Verse 6 talks about the temporary nature of our earthly life, and it points to the permanent work of God. Notice the phrase: "my salvation will be forever, and my righteousness will never be dismayed." The Hebrew word for "dismayed" means to be discouraged, to be shattered, or to be frightened. God says that his righteousness is never like that.

Have you ever experienced that someone's anxiety or fear made you nervous or afraid? You were doing just fine and then the emotions of other people triggered you? Or maybe you have a narrative that runs through your head, and the frequency of what you are thinking about makes it feel even truer.

It is good for you to be reminded that although you may be discouraged, God is not. You may be frightened. But he's completely confident. You may be nervous. He's in complete control. His righteousness is never dismayed.

³ <https://quoteinvestigator.com/2012/11/15/arc-of-universe/>

Verse 7 rounds out this section. Isaiah reminds them not to listen to the **reproaches of their opponents**. The people of God were facing opposition. That's clear, based upon phrases like "the reproach of man" and "dismayed at their revilings." Isaiah reminds God's people about the future: "... my righteousness will be forever and my salvation to all generations."

Are you discouraged? Are you weary? Do you feel faint-hearted? One of the ways the Bible helps us is to speak God's Word to us. One of the strategies for fighting discouragement is to remind yourself what is true about you in Christ. Some of you are weary today not only because your life is really hard, but because you've been listening to the wrong narrative. You've listened to what the culture says, what your enemies say, what the Devil says, and even what you say about yourself.

Scott Sauls gives an example of the kind of narrative that we need to believe and hear from others

You are the Image of God. You are loved at your best, you are loved at your worst. You are uniquely gifted. You are fearfully and wonderfully made. You are God's child, the bride of Jesus, the vessel of the Holy Spirit, and an heir of the universe.⁴

Listen! This is more than positive thinking. This is thinking about ourselves through a lens of what God, in Christ, thinks of us. Listen carefully.

2. Are You Looking?

The second question relates to what we are looking for. What is the source of our hope? Where are we looking for confidence that help is coming? These are really important questions. And we all ask them. Who are you listening to now shifts who are you looking to?

The answer to this question is connected to the idea of waking up or to someone being called upon to act. We see this in verse 9:

Awake, awake, put on strength, O arm of the LORD; awake, as in days of old, the generations of long ago. Was it not you who cut Rahab in pieces, who pierced the dragon? (Isa. 51:9).

Isaiah is inviting the people of God to look to their God for the help they need. He points them to their past as evidence that God is trustworthy. "Awake, as in the days of old, the generations long ago" (51:9). A sense of history is really important. It's critical as you read your Bible and as you think about your life.

Some of you need to consider that the trial you're in right now is going to be the situation you look back on with stunned gratitude for how the Lord helped you. It's going to be an amazing story. You're just not at the end yet!

In verses 9b-10, Isaiah rehearses the power of God's past deliverances. "Rahab" is how Isaiah refers to Egypt (see 30:17). God pierced the dragon. He dried up the sea. And God's people passed through it. Isaiah is looking to God for his deliverance, and he can't help but break out into praise:

⁴ <https://scottsauls.com/blog/2021/05/06/the-uplifting-potential-of-our-words/>

And the ransomed of the LORD shall return and come to Zion with singing; everlasting joy shall be upon their heads; they shall obtain gladness and joy, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away (Isa. 51:11).

But notice what follows! Isaiah lavishes praise on God for the purpose of encouragement. He reminds the people what God is like.

- God is the one who comforts you, so stop being afraid of people (v. 12)
- God is the creator of the universe, so stop giving your oppressors so much power over you (v. 13)
- God is going to help those who are “bowed down” (v. 14)
- God is the one who stirs up the sea (v. 15)
- God is the one who protects his people and who says, “You are my people” (v. 16)

It’s quite a list. And it’s meant to provide deep comfort.

And then Isaiah uses a play on words. After appealing to God to awaken because he needs God’s help. He tells the people of God to wake up. And not to trust in themselves, but to have a God-oriented perspective.

Verses 17-20 are verses loaded with heaviness because of how hard their exile will be. They’ve experienced the discipline of the Lord.

But notice the promise to those who are afflicted (v. 21). These words are incredible:

Thus says your Lord, the LORD, your God who pleads the cause of his people: “Behold, I have taken from your hand the cup of staggering; the bowl of my wrath you shall drink no more” (Isa. 51:22).

And if you read the rest of the text, God not only promises relief – he also promises justice. In the end, God is victorious over the enemies of God’s people and his plan.

The point should be clear enough. But let me make it plain. Discouragement grows when you are looking for the wrong kind of help. Isaiah points us to look carefully to whom we are looking for our help.

Hardship has a way of refining what we know to be true about God. Pain and suffering can make you a better theologian if you’ll look to the right source of strength.

Martin Luther had this mindset. Here’s what he wrote:

For as soon as God’s Word becomes known through you, the devil will afflict you, will make a real [theologian] of you, and will teach you by his temptations to seek and to love God’s Word. For I myself ... owe my [Roman Catholic opponents] many thanks for so beating, pressing and

frightening me through the devil's raging that they have turned me into a fairly good theologian, driving me to the goal I should never have reached.⁵

The writer of Hebrews talks about a great cloud of witnesses. I'm not sure what image he had in mind. But it was much like the audience members on the sidelines of a race. Imagine Isaiah saying to your weary heart:

- Listen: God's going to help you!
- Look: The finish line is just around the corner. Keep going!

True encouragement comes from listening to the right message and looking for true hope.

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⁵ Raymond C. Ortlund Jr. and R. Kent Hughes, [*Isaiah: God Saves Sinners*](#), Preaching the Word (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2005), 336.