

**“CHRONICLES OF ENCOURAGEMENT - 1”**  
*1 Chronicles 16:7-36*

We live in a world which constantly changing - sometimes for the better, sometimes for the worse. Ways of doing things are changing, ways of relating to other people, ways of doing business, ways of communicating. Things are changing within the church as Christians seek to adapt to the transformation of the society and culture in which we live. Things are changing here at Wade Street Church. I was recently told that Lichfield is one of only eleven United Reformed Churches in Britain that have grown since 1990. We have seen changes in the work we do and we are facing changes in the buildings and premises. All kinds of things are happening that excite us, inspire us, scare us, unsettle us. And those who have been here longest are able to track the greatest changes. We live and work and worship and witness in a time of changing circumstances. Of course, that's always been the case, but whether or not the pace of change is any quicker today, we are still left feeling slightly disoriented from time to time.

A few weeks back, when we were talking about the new development and the resources we would need to enable that to happen, Pat Cartmale shared with me and with the elders some passages for our encouragement from the Old Testament books of *Chronicles*. She mentioned two sections in particular, but there are, of course, many other places to which we could have turned. We're going to take a look at one of those passages this evening - and during the autumn we'll consider a couple of others as well. They are very appropriate to us in our situation because they, too, were written in response to a situation of great change and upheaval in the lives of God's people. In fact, one commentator (Michael Wilcock in *The Bible Speaks Today* series) entitles his comments on the section we've looked at tonight, "*Changeless grace in changing circumstances.*"

I don't suppose many of us ever really look into these two books of the Old Testament. They seem to be pretty well full of lists and genealogies, and what few bits of narrative there are are really only summaries of what can be found elsewhere in the Old Testament, particularly in the books of *Samuel* and *Kings*. If you look carefully, though, you will see that there are some subtle differences of emphasis between *Chronicles* and the other historical books of the Bible. I won't go into all those this evening as it's not the point of what we have to say, but don't forget (as we've said so many times before) anyone who writes a book makes decisions about what to include and what to leave out, how to phrase things and what to emphasise, based on his or her purpose in writing.

So it is that these two books were written with a particular aim in mind, connected very closely to the time in which they were written. These were amongst the last books of the Old Testament to be written and so

were intended to be read by the people of Israel who had returned for a long period of exile in a foreign country. As they came back to the land of their roots, a land that they believed had been promised to them by God as part of his eternal covenant with them, they were a little bewildered at all that had gone on and at the prospect of all that was going to happen. What was going on? Why had God allowed this to happen to them? What about their roots and their heritage? They felt that there was a real danger of becoming disconnected from their history and they wondered, quite frankly, what God thought he was playing at. Was he still interested in them now that they no longer had a king of David's line? They were disorientated by all the changes that were going on and needed reassurance that God was still there.

So someone, possibly Ezra, wrote these two books - which we now call *Chronicles* - to demonstrate that God was still interested in them. But that interest is not demonstrated in transitory things: It is demonstrated by the unchanging nature of the basis of their faith. The stability is apparent in such things as the Law, the Temple and the words of the prophets. *I Chronicles* begins at the beginning, with Adam, and charts the development of God's dealings with his people down through their turbulent history. The lists of names and the genealogies serve to emphasise the continuity that there has been, the ways in which so much is interconnected. God's activity within the life of this chosen nation has a consistency about it which is reassuring and comforting. It is full of words of encouragement, with plenty of examples to back it up - which is why I've entitled this short series *Chronicles of Encouragement*.

And so to the passage we've read this evening, which in many ways sums up all that we've just been saying. This is a passage which can help us to see something of the unchanging nature of God himself and give us a sure and certain hope in the midst of so much that is going on around us. Not least there is the reminder that even though God's people were once few in number (*v19*), as has been the case at different times in the story of this congregation, God continued to be faithful and blessed those who have remained true to him and to his word.

These verses are part of the story which tells of the bringing of the Ark of the Covenant to Jerusalem. The Ark was a powerful symbol for God's people: it reminded them of the giving of the Law, of the escape from Egypt, of the holiness of God and of their identity as God's people. It was the focal point of their worship and was now being brought to its final destination in the capital city of King David, with the intention that it should one day be housed in a specially built Temple, which would also be an impressive reminder of God's glory. And this section is about the celebrations surrounding the installation of the Ark inside a specially designed and erected tent (*16:1*). And these celebrations fittingly involved a blend of ancient ceremony and contemporary worship.

We didn't have time to read the whole of this section, but if you have a look at it some time you'll see that the priests and Levites - all the people who are involved in leading the worship of God's people - are told to go through fairly elaborate ceremonies of consecration and preparation. And all the ritual surrounding that is drawn from the earliest instructions to the priesthood given to them by Moses and recorded in the book of *Exodus*. This was in itself a powerful reminder of their heritage. They were linked in a more or less unbroken chain of tradition to the very earliest days of their history as a nation.

But, as part of the worship surrounding this ceremony, King David gives Asaph (the leader of the worship group - *16:4-6*) a new song to sing. Of course, for us this song is around three thousand years old. It contains parts that are familiar from three of the Psalms (*96, 105, 106*). It's an old, traditional part of the worship of God's people. But it wasn't on this occasion. Some people have the impression, it seems to me, that old, traditional songs and hymns have somehow always been there. It's as if they were handed down by God on tablets of stone and were decreed as the only valid forms of worship that God's people could ever use. (Happily, I don't think there's anyone in this congregation who has that view!) But here we see God's people engaging in worship that, for them, would have been bang up to date - a new song written especially for the occasion. Everything was new and unfamiliar once upon a time.

And this new song - with a special arrangement by Asaph - despite its newness of expression, still celebrates the unchanging nature of God. This is a song which speaks of stability, which encourages the people of God by reminding them that, even in the rapidly changing and, for some, highly unsettling situation in which they found themselves, God is at work and they are to thank him for it. The opening line of the song exhorts them to "*Give thanks to the LORD*" and as they do so they are to "*call on his name*". As they pray for the future, they are to praise God for what has already happened. In these words they are called to thank God for ...

## 1. HIS DEEDS

Several times in these lines, David calls on the people to proclaim God's "*wonderful acts*", "*wonders*", "*miracles*", "*marvellous deeds*". The basis of their thanks is what God has done. He is an active God, a God who gets involved in his world and who **does** things. The God whom these people worship is not the Deist God who has created the world and then sat back to let it all get on with itself with no intervention, no connection, no relationship. God has been active within their history. He has protected them, punished them, loved them, healed them, inspired them, taught them. And those acts, which have taken place within their history, still have their effects today. God is still at work. He is still interested in them.

And that is still true today. God is still doing mighty deeds, still making his presence felt in our world, in our lives, in our church. There is much to praise him for that has happened in the past, not least the way in which this church has been blessed over the past one hundred and ninety years. And when we look at our own lives, even if we are bewildered by what is going on at the moment, we can see instances of God's "*wonderful acts*" and "*mighty deeds*". Some of us can indeed speak of miracles and wonders, of times in our lives when God has been sovereignly and spectacularly at work. Thank God for that, and praise him that he never stops doing that.

## 2. **HIS DECISION**

In the section of his song which begins in *v14*, we read that the people are also to thank God for his decision. He has made his judgements - the writ of which runs through the whole earth - and part of his judgement is a covenant which he has made with his people. It was God's decision and his alone. We have seen on many occasions as we have considered the covenants God makes that they are at his initiative and depend on him alone. And this covenant he has made is one which he will keep for ever (*v16*): it is an "*everlasting covenant*" (*v17*). The Psalmist is leaving no room for misunderstanding here - God has made his decision and he will keep to it.

And not only does he keep his covenant with his people, but he also protects those who are a part of it. The next section (*vv19-22*) emphasises that. When God calls people, he also keeps them. And that is true as much of the new covenant as of the old. Remember, Jesus came into the world to inaugurate a new covenant with all humankind, one which as sealed by his blood and drew all who have faith into the orbit of God's amazing love. You and I are a part of that. We can thank God for his decision, his decision to call us into his family. And we can thank him that he protects us and ensures that no-one does us harm.

As I suggested earlier, I think there's a special word for us as a congregation here. Even when this congregation has been few in number, God has protected the witness of his people here. Even at times when we've been unsure where we are going, God has remained faithful to the promises that were made back at the beginning of the nineteenth century, on the basis of which this place was built. I truly believe there are great things in store for us here - but we need to keep hanging on to the promise of God's protection when things might seem to be a bit tough.

### 3. DIVINITY

The reason why the people are to “*give thanks to the LORD*” for his deeds and his decision is because of his divinity. This is a real god, **the** real god. We are not talking here of an idol, of a false god., of an idea or a philosophy. This is **the** god who created the world and built the starry heavens. All other gods are but idols. The people who read these words (as opposed to the people who first sang them) would have remembered occasions in their history when the other gods had been defeated: when the Philistine god Dagon had been toppled in the pagan temple, when Baal had so clearly failed to show himself to his priests on Mount Carmel. They may have remembered *Psalm 115:4-7* or Jeremiah’s mocking words in *Jeremiah 10:3-5*.

This God, the God who encourages and protects and inspires, is a God who can act, as we’ve already seen. This is not an impotent idol, but an omnipotent God; not an idol made from a carved tree, but a God who created the tree; not a god who is manipulated by men and women in the search for their own way, but a God who decides and calls men and women to his perfect way. This is the God who is active today, whose strength is not diminished by time, whose power is not weakened with each passing generation.

This is a God who is worthy of our complete devotion. He towers above all other idols, above all other philosophies and concepts and ideas. We may try to follow our own ideas, to put our faith in other people’s philosophies - but they are all, as the Preacher tells us in *Ecclesiastes*, “*just chasing after wind.*” Be encouraged by the authentic divinity of the One True God.

### 4. HIS DELIGHT

And let us also be encouraged to delight in him. The song here tells us of the ways in which all creation delights in him (*vv29b-33*). There is an order and an exuberance in the world around us that speak of a great Creator. When we consider the “*splendour of his holiness*”, we too are surely moved to join in that great song of praise and worship. God calls us to live life with a serious eye to what is going on around us, but he also calls us to a life of enjoyment. This ceremony for the installation of the ark was a ceremony that took very seriously the ritual and worship of God’s people, but it was also an occasion of great rejoicing and celebration.

As people who celebrate the great deeds of our God and who are secure in the knowledge that his decision includes us, then we too should be able to delight in him, to “*live life to the full*” as Jesus said. There

should be a sense of wonder and awe and laughter about our lives. God has given us this world to enjoy, and we can join with all creation in delighting in him. Life can be tough - as it had been for these Israelites - but there are always occasions to revel and relax. Make the most of them, and thank the God who has given you that opportunity.

## 5. **THE DOXOLOGY**

This section finishes with a short “doxology”, a short declaration of praise. Asaph and his trumpeters and percussionists and string players and vocalists had lifted the spirits of the people in this song of praise to a God whose deeds, decision, divinity and delight are well worth celebrating. And as the last chord died away, all the people said “*Amen*” and “*Hallelujah!*” They agreed with the words and they were caught up in the music. In all the worship of the ceremony they had been uplifted. And those who read this story many years later would have begun to see that they did have a God who cared about them. The huge upheavals which had gone on in their lives and which were still going on as they re-adapted to life after exile were nothing to worry about unduly. Their God was still in charge. Their God was still interested in them. Their God was still going to bless them.

He’s still the same God. He still works in mighty ways. We may find ourselves overwhelmed at times by the sheer speed of change. The familiar may be disappearing. The new may challenge and unsettle us. But it’s still the same God behind it all. He wants the best for his people and he has great blessings in store for those who continue to put their faith in him. “*Give thanks to the LORD, for he is good; his love endures for ever. Praise be to the LORD, the God of Israel, from everlasting to everlasting.*”

*“The all the people said ‘Amen’ and ‘Praise the LORD’.”*