

5. Encouraging one another

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The definition of 'encourage' can be found in Webster's dictionary. It is: "To inspire with hope, courage, or confidence; hearten. To give support to. To stimulate" It is an activity that one person is doing to strengthen the other. It is a deliberate choice of the initiator to bring the others up to their feet to continue what they were doing or need to get done.

A good coach, great commander, loving mom, caring dad, concerned friend, and even a complete stranger are great candidates to fulfill this job as an encourager. A little card, a stickie note, a quick phone call, a short text or email, a pat on the back, and nice and friendly hug from these encouragers can go a long way during the time of difficulties.

We have the Secret Sisters ministry among the participating ladies in our church. I think it is one of the neatest ministries we can have. They give cards, notes, gifts, and prayers for each other. The one who receives does not know who is giving these precious things, but she prays for her secret sister. At the end of the year, they have a party and get to know their secret sisters' identities. I think it is fantastic. A good job, ladies. But it is not going to work for guys. It just is not our bag.

We all know there was a man who encouraged and helped out the apostle Paul when he hit rock bottom as a persecutor of the Church of Jesus Christ in Acts 11. His name was Barnabas which means 'the Son of Encourager.' What a great call Barnabas had! While no apostles of Jesus Christ wanted to see Paul because he was the enemy of the Lord prior to his conversion to Christianity, Barnabas encouraged them to reconsider and he finally had them to give Paul their endorsement for his missionary work.

Now Paul is about to do what Barnabas did to him many years ago. Paul is going to encourage the believers of Thessalonica to stay in the course of holy life to glorify Jesus their Savior. But before he gave his encouragement to these people, they gave him encouragement also by living holy.

How beautiful to see Christian brothers and sisters encourage one another instead of getting on each other's nerves and throats!

A. PAUL'S CONCERN FOR THE THESSALONIANS' FAITH

1 Thessalonians 3:1-5 Therefore, when we could no longer endure it, we thought it good to be left in Athens alone, 2 and sent Timothy, our brother and minister of God, and our fellow laborer in the gospel of Christ, to establish you and encourage you concerning your faith, 3 that no one should be shaken by these afflictions; for you yourselves know that we are appointed to this. 4 For, in fact, we told you before when we were with you that we would suffer tribulation, just as it happened, and you know. 5 For this reason, when I could no longer endure it, I sent to know your faith, lest by some means the tempter had tempted you, and our labor might be in vain.

What is your interpretation of this?

In v1, we see the apostle Paul simply goes with what is happening around him instead of insisting on having his way. He was wise and mature enough in the Lord

to notice that it was God's will for him to stay in Corinth rather than heading out to Thessalonica on his own.

The teachers of the 'Prosperity Gospel' teach that if Christians just have enough faith, they won't suffer. But Paul says affliction walks hand in hand with faith in Christ. They're part of the same package that God has granted us while we live in this world.

God isn't the author of evil, nor is He the cause of evil actions against us. Sin is the bitter root of the pain and violence that has infested our world.

2 Corinthians 4:8-10 We are hard pressed on every side, yet not crushed; we are perplexed, but not in despair; 9 persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed—10 always carrying about in the body the dying of the Lord Jesus, that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our body.

Suffering is not only inevitable, but the pain also brings is essential to our growth in two ways:

1) Afflictions act as tutors, teaching us lessons about God and His Word we would never learn otherwise.

Psalm 119:71 It is good for me that I have been afflicted, That I may learn Your statutes.

2) Adversity slows us down and sensitizes us to God.

Affliction makes us put on the brakes and carefully examine where we're going and why we're going there. It reveals the truth about the nature of ourselves and the nature of God, who allows both prosperity and hardship to enter our lives.

What an endorsement we find about Timothy from this aging apostle of God! He was the ideal man to send to the church to help them stand firm. Timothy and Titus were Paul's "special agents" whom he used as troubleshooters whenever the churches had problems. Paul sent Timothy to Corinth to help straighten out the problems there in 1 Corinthians 16. He also planned to send Timothy to help the believers in Philippi in Philippians 2.

Timothy was also a minister. This is simply the Greek word for a 'servant'. Our English word "deacon" comes from this word, 'diakonos'. Timothy was not afraid to work. He had faithfully served with Paul and knew how to minister in the churches. It is a demanding thing to establish new Christians. They have many problems and often do not grow as fast as we think they should. Teaching them requires love and patience, and Timothy had these qualities.

Pain is the gift nobody wants, it is the gift everybody must open in order to grow. When it lands on your doorstep, you shouldn't be afraid to unwrap it. For it contains never-to-be-forgotten lessons about life.

The trials and testings that come to our lives as Christians are not accidents – they are appointments from God to train us, to strengthen us, and to shape us. Persecution is not foreign to the believers but a normal part of the Christian life. We must warn new believers that the way is not easy as they seek to live for Christ. Otherwise, when trials come, these babes in Christ will be discouraged and defeated.

Of course, behind these persecutions is satan, the enemy of the Christian. He is the tempter, and he seeks to ruin our faith.

B. ENCOURAGED BY THE GOOD NEWS FROM THESSALONICA

1 Thessalonians 3:6-8 But now that Timothy has come to us from you, and brought us good news of your faith and love, and that you always have good remembrance of us, greatly desiring to see us, as we also to see you- 7 therefore, brethren, in all our affliction and distress we were comforted concerning you by your faith. 8 For now we live, if you stand fast in the Lord.

What do you see here?

The believers in Thessalonica could easily put all the blame on Paul who left them practically high and dry after a short visit with them. But they were not resentful, rather longing to see them. Most of all their faith in Christ was strong.

We can imagine that Paul slept much easier after hearing Timothy's report about the Thessalonians. What a burden had been lifted from his soul!

It would be difficult for others not to notice such a perspective. An attitude of grateful joy is contagious and one of the most convincing witnesses of the reality of Christ in our lives.

At the same time, the attitude of despair and negativeness are equally contagious and bring problems not only to us but also to those who are around us.

You may say, "I am not a negative person." Good, but just to be sure, let's do a simple test to ourselves: Can you compare how often you complain and grumble for what you don't have or the things happen in your daily life vs. how often you give thanks to God for what He has done in your life? Which one has more? We tend to be more negative for what we don't have than being grateful for what we have.

Or you may say, "The world is full of idiots; just about everybody doesn't know what he or she is doing." If you feel that way, you not only have a negative attitude toward God but also you have a spirit of pride.

Nothing delights me more than seeing a lost sinner coming to Jesus Christ. The second delightful thing for me would be seeing the people who attend our church grow spiritually.

While I teach, I try to make eye contact with the people whom I teach on Sunday morning and Thursday Bible Studies. I see many different facial expressions: from listening intently, to wandering around in the la-la land, to some could care less about what I say, to someone who is angry at me, because I just talked about whatever he or she has been doing wrong and convicted by the Holy Spirit.

When we get convicted by the Holy Spirit, we can choose to make necessary changes in our lives to be more holy like Jesus or we can choose to ignore which leads us to spiritual apathy. That is why the apostle Paul was concerned about the believers in Thessalonica.

C. PRAYERS FOR THE CHURCH OF THESSALONICA

1 Thessalonians 3:9-13 For what thanks can we render to God for you, for all the joy with which we rejoice for your sake before our God, 10 night and day praying exceedingly that we may see your face and perfect what is lack-

ing in your faith? 11 Now may our God and Father Himself, and our Lord Jesus Christ, direct our way to you. 12 And may the Lord make you increase and abound in love to one another and to all, just as we do to you, 13 so that He may establish your hearts blameless in holiness before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ with all His saints.

What kind of interpretation are you getting from this paragraph?

In the midst of all this joy, Paul called attention to the fact that they were still lacking. Even though the apostle repeatedly complimented them, he was also concerned to provide what is lacking in their faith. Paul believed that his personal presence would be a help to the Thessalonians.

Now the apostle Paul was praying in a benediction style with three specific requests:

1) He prayed for their faith to be mature. – v10

Our faith never reaches perfection. There is always a need for adjustment and growth. To grow our faith, it must be tested. Faith that cannot be tested cannot be trusted. God tests our faith, not to destroy it, but to develop it and strengthen it.

2) He prayed for their love to abound. – v12

Times of suffering can be times of selfishness. Persecuted or suffering people can often become very self-centered and demanding. What life does to us depends on what life finds in us. Nothing reveals the true inner man like the furnace of affliction. Some people build walls in times of trial and shut themselves off. Others build bridges and draw closer to the Lord and His people. Our growing faith in God ought to result in a growing love for others.

3) He prayed for their holiness of life. – v13

Again, it is the return of Jesus Christ that motivates the believer to live a holy life. Our Lord's return is also a source of stability in the Christian life. Where there is stability, there can be sanctity. And where there is holiness, there is assurance. The two go together.

As we review this chapter, we see how important it is to care for new Christians. Leading someone to Christ is not enough. We must also lead him on in the Christian life and help him get established. If he is not established, he will fall when the winds of persecution start to blow. If he cannot stand, he will never learn to walk in the Lord.

D. APPLICATIONS

1) Pain is the gift nobody wants, it is the gift everybody must open in order to grow.

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2) God tests our faith, not to destroy it, but to develop it and strengthen it.

Our faith never reaches perfection. There is always a need for adjustment and growth. To grow our faith, it must be tested. Faith that cannot be tested cannot be trusted.

3) Our growing faith in God ought to result in a growing love for others.