

# ENCOURAGEMENT AND THE CHURCH



ENCOURAGEMENT (2)

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A REVISION STUDY FROM  
THE FELLOWSHIP OF AILBE

Encouragement and the Church  
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## Welcome to *Encouragement and the Church*

Everyone needs encouragement. People who are in sin need it. People who are flying high with the Lord need it. People who can't seem to get going with the Lord need encouragement. So also people who are faced with trials, setbacks, opposition, and opportunities.

Everyone needs encouragement, and everyone needs to be ready to encourage others (Heb. 10.24). When whole churches are encouraged, good things happen. This is what we'll see from Paul's ministry of encouragement to the churches in Corinth and Thessalonica.

*ReVision* studies are designed as brief introductions to the subject under consideration. We hope they will enlarge your worldview, help you to become more firmly rooted in Scripture, equip you to minister to others, and stimulate you to want to learn more about the Word of God and the Biblical worldview.

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May the Lord bless your study of His Word.

T. M. Moore  
Principal

## 1 The Power of Encouragement

*Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our tribulation, that we may be able to comfort those who are in any trouble, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God.* 2 Corinthians 1.3, 4

### *A church transformed*

Some time late in the first century, Clement, pastor of the churches in Rome, and a former ministry companion of the apostle Paul, wrote a lengthy letter to the churches in Corinth. In his opening paragraphs, he described the church in Corinth as it had come to be known in his day: “For who ever dwelt even for a short time among you, and did not find your faith to be as fruitful of virtue as it was firmly established? Who did not admire the sobriety and moderation of your godliness in Christ? Who did not proclaim the magnificence of your habitual hospitality? And who did not rejoice over your perfect and well-grounded knowledge? For ye did all things without respect of persons, and walked in the commandments of God, being obedient to those who had the rule over you, and giving all fitting honour to the presbyters among you. Ye enjoined young men to be of a sober and serious mind; ye instructed your wives to do all things with a blameless, becoming, and pure conscience, loving their husbands as in duty bound; and ye taught them that, living in the rule of obedience, they should manage their household affairs becomingly, and be in every respect marked by discretion.”

Wait. The church in Corinth? That church Paul wrote so harshly to in 1 Corinthians? The church to which Paul wrote was wracked with schism, turned a blind eye to scandalous sin, dragged its feet on Christian growth, abused the worship of God and the Lord’s Supper, and walked in stride with worldly ways rather than the indwelling Spirit of God. Was Clement writing to *this* church?

He continued, “Moreover, ye were all distinguished by humility, and were in no respect puffed up with pride, but yielded obedience rather than extorted it, and were more willing to give than to receive. Content with the provision which God had made for you, and carefully attending to His words, ye were inwardly filled with His doctrine, and His sufferings were before your eyes. Thus a profound and abundant peace was given to you all, and ye had an insatiable desire for doing good, while a full outpouring of the Holy Spirit was upon you all. Full of holy designs, ye did, with true earnestness of mind and a godly confidence, stretch forth your hands to God Almighty, beseeching Him to be merciful unto you, if ye had been guilty of any involuntary transgression. Day and night ye were anxious for the whole brotherhood, that the number of God’s elect might be saved with mercy and a good conscience. Ye were sincere and uncorrupted, and forgetful of injuries between one another. Every kind of faction and schism was abominable in your sight. Ye mourned over the transgressions of your neighbours: their deficiencies you deemed your own. Ye never grudged any act of kindness, being ‘ready to every good work.’ Adorned by a thoroughly virtuous and religious life, ye did all things in the fear of God. The commandments and ordinances of the Lord were written upon the tablets of your hearts.”<sup>[1]</sup>

Yes, indeed, Clement was writing to the same church Paul had scolded and threatened so pointedly in his first epistle. It was the same church; but then again, it wasn’t.

### *What happened here?*

What happened in Corinth to bring about this change? To put it succinctly, Paul and the Encourager from God.

Let’s look again at 2 Corinthians 1.3, 4, this time changing the word “comfort” to “encouragement”, and “comforts” to “encourages” – changes which the Greek text will certainly allow: *Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all encouragement, who encourages us in all our tribulation, that we*

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*may be able to encourage those who are in any trouble, with the encouragement with which we ourselves are encouraged by God.*

Paul says that he and the Corinthians (“we”) were “encouraged by God.” God, Whose work it is to encourage His people, had accomplished a great work of encouragement in Corinth. He had infused the hearts of the Corinthians with the courage they needed to break the chains of schism, moral compromise, and self-interest, and to be renewed in love for God and one another with transforming power.

Paul was the human agent God used to strike the bolt of encouragement in the souls of the Corinthians, so that they were able to overcome their sinful choices and return to the path of growth and mission God intends for all His churches. And Paul, as we see in 2 Corinthians, was greatly encouraged to see the way the Corinthians responded to the encouragement he wrote to them in his first epistle. He was so encouraged, in fact, that he was making plans to return to them with the expectation that they would rejoice together upon being reunited.

God had encouraged the Corinthians through Paul’s writing; and now they must continue to encourage one another with the encouragement they themselves received from God. These verses remind us of Paul’s words to the church in Thessalonica: “Therefore comfort [encourage] each other and edify one another, just as you also are doing.

### *Case studies of encouragement*

The New Testament churches at Corinth and Thessalonica offer compelling examples of the power of encouragement at work within the Body of Christ. The church in Corinth was recovered from its lapsed and languishing condition and renewed in vision, love for God and one another, and the mission of being the Body of Christ to its community.

The church in Thessalonica was a model congregation. Paul had only good things to say to them, when he wrote to follow-up his ministry with them in 1 and 2 Thessalonians. But he did not want the Thessalonians to rest on their laurels, and so through various works of encouragement he urged them to “excel still more” in all the good works and shining examples they had put before the watching world.

As we look more closely at Paul’s ministry to these churches, we’ll see just how powerful and transforming the work of encouragement can be. We’ll note various tools that we can use for encouraging one another, and we’ll see that encouragement isn’t always fun and games. Sometimes encouragement can be brutal, tearing down whatever is wicked so that new edifices of grace, truth, and glory can be constructed.

God has given us His Encourager to dwell in us and our churches. When we engage His work – in our own lives and on behalf of one another – holy spiritual power is unleashed, hot with the Son of God, to make all things new, all things glad and glorious, and all things reflective of the living Christ, both in our souls and in all aspects of congregational life. Thus it may well be said of us and our churches, “a profound and abundant peace was given to you all, and ye had an insatiable desire for doing good, while a full outpouring of the Holy Spirit was upon you all.”

Amen. Let it be so.

### *For reflection*

1. What’s the difference between “comfort” and “encouragement”? Why do you think the various forms of “encouragement” might be better in our text?
2. Why do people who are languishing in sin need courage? Courage to do what?
3. How did Clement acknowledge that the transforming work done in Corinth was accomplished by the Encourager of God?

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*Next steps – Preparation: Begin to pray daily for your church – leaders, members, programs. Ask God to use you to encourage your church in any way He can.*

## 2 When Good Enough Isn't

*For it has been declared to me concerning you, my brethren, by those of Chloe's household, that there are contentions among you... Now concerning the things of which you wrote to me... 1 Corinthians 1.11, 7.1*

### *Church in a mess*

The Church in Corinth was in a mess. And they knew it.

Having taken off like a rocket (Acts 18.1-11, 24-28), the Corinthian churches had not been careful about maintaining the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace (Eph. 4.3). Consequently, squabbles, divisions, and boastings arose among the various house churches, leading to what might be viewed as an early form of denominationalism (1 Cor. 1.10-13). All their competing and boasting had caused them to lose sight of the fact that not many of them were wise, noble, or mighty (1 Cor. 1.26). They were so busy vaunting themselves that they neglected Jesus and the Spirit, so that they were unable to judge matters spiritually and righteously (1 Cor. 2).

They were acting like middle-schoolers (1 Cor. 3.1-4), strutting and fussing and bullying one another in the Name of the Lord. They were making their pet doctrines into a new foundation of faith, and were in danger of slipping off the one Foundation that could keep them together (1 Cor. 3.5-16). They were so busy boasting in men that they had forgotten that they were called, not to be wise, but to be fools, and to serve one another in love (1 Cor. 4).

Worse, they had turned a blind eye to serious sin in their midst (1 Cor. 5). This was inexcusable. Other sins were reported to Paul: lawsuits between brethren, illicit sexual practices (1 Cor. 6), misguided behavior concerning marriage and divorce (1 Cor. 7), mingling with pagan practices, and causing one another to stumble (1 Cor. 8).

The Corinthians knew they were in a mess. Something was stirring within them that needed to be addressed. They had lost their peace and fellowship. Their witness was compromised, as was their worship of the Lord (1 Cor. 11, 14). They'd lost sight of the fact that they were one body in Christ (1 Cor. 12), and they needed to recover their calling to love one another (1 Cor. 13).

What to do? The leaders of the churches knew they needed help, but they had neither the wisdom nor the courage to sort things out and restore the Church.

Someone got the idea to write to Paul for help. More accurately, the Spirit of God moved them to get in touch with Paul.

### *Competent to encourage*

It was the smartest thing they could have done. Indeed, it must have been the Spirit of God, striving within them, to get them to agree to send a delegation from Chloe's house church (1 Cor. 1.11) to meet with Paul and seek his help. A letter was composed, outlining certain of the problems; but oral reports were also given (1 Cor. 5.1) to supplement the letter and help Paul get a complete picture of the mess in Corinth.

Why Paul? Didn't they *know* what he'd say? Didn't they know he would not spare his words? Would not coddle or console them? That he would speak the truth and demand repentance, revival, and renewal in the Lord?

I suspect they did. They didn't have the courage or wisdom to achieve renewal on their own. But something in their souls said they needed it; so they turned to the one man who was competent to encourage them –

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willing to hear and understand, bold to instruct, patient to counsel and clarify, willing to help, and unlikely to mince words.

Paul loved them. They knew that. He had spent himself for eighteen months to win and nurture the souls of the Corinthian believers (2 Cor. 12.15). He had not burdened them financially (1 Cor. 9) – which they also knew, and which perhaps added to their spiritual disquiet (if it didn't before they wrote, Paul made sure it did when he replied). And they probably also thought that, if he wrote to them about all this mess, and encouraged them in particular ways, he would also return to Corinth to make sure they had carried out his instructions.

### *This way to courage*

The Corinthians didn't just lack the wisdom to figure out how to fix their mess. They lacked the courage to do so. They didn't want to yield on their cherished views, or look bad before their pagan neighbors, or admit they'd been wrong, or have to back down on some erroneous choices or teachings, or confess that they just didn't love one another very much. They had settled into a "good enough" view of the faith, and they would have been content just to continue on that tack until their consciences became seared, and the *status quo* no longer troubled them. Only the Spirit of God, Whose temple they were (1 Cor. 3.16), was *not* content. He was stirring in them. Showing them the mess. Creating a desire for something better. Directing them to seek the help and encouragement they required to do what needed to be done.

Courage to grow in the Lord and serve Him selflessly in the Kingdom comes from the indwelling Spirit of God. He is the power of the Kingdom for us to fulfill our calling in the Lord (Acts 1.8; 1 Cor. 4.20; 1 Thess. 2.12). And when He is stirring within us, we should listen well. We should try to discern what He's prompting us to understand, see, change, or improve – where, in other words, we need courage to break out of our own version of "good enough" Christianity and into the exceedingly abundantly more He offers.

But we may need outside help. The stirring within us – that feeling of unsettledness; of wanting to do something, but not knowing what; that sense that something's not right, or at least, not complete – may well be the Spirit of God. But most of us are like the Corinthians, neither wise nor courageous enough to know or do what we should.

This is where the encouragement of our fellow believers can help. Are you willing to seek the encouragement of others in your time of need? Your time of unrest or uncertainty? Your time of longing for more? And are you prepared to offer encouragement to any who might come to you, their souls astir and seeking the courage to grow in the Lord and His work?

Kudos to the Corinthians for being willing to turn to Paul. And kudos to Paul for doing the hard work of encouragement that this messed-up church sorely needed.

And kudos to us if we learn the lessons of encouragement Paul will show us – both for when we need encouragement, and for when we need to give it.

### *For reflection*

1. Why were the Corinthian churches in a "mess"? What do we mean by "good enough" Christianity?
2. How might you be able to know when the Holy Spirit is stirring in you to seek some encouragement?
3. What can you begin doing today that will help you in being ready to encourage your fellow believers?

*Next Step – Transformation: Begin praying today, and pray every day, that God will prepare you to encourage your fellow believers.*

### 3 Able to Encourage

*Watch, stand fast in the faith, be brave, be strong. Let all that you do be done with love.* 1 Corinthians 16.13

#### *A congregation encouraged*

That Paul was able to encourage the Corinthians seems clear enough, both from 2 Corinthians as well as from the opening paragraphs of Clement's first epistle. Already, when Paul was writing 2 Corinthians, the mess the Corinthians had made was being cleaned up; and Paul was persuaded that they were ready for the kind of "solid food" they were not able to receive when he wrote 1 Corinthians 3.1-4.

He treated the believers in 1 Corinthians as babes in Christ; in 2 Corinthians, he treated them as recovered, restored, and ready for greater things in the Lord.

The differences between 1 and 2 Corinthians could not be more stark. The first deals with problems, irregularities, and neglected things; it is written in a tone of admonition. The second is laudatory and hortatory in tone, and includes instruction designed to keep the Corinthians moving forward in Christ and the work of the Church. 2 Corinthians is much more pastoral, visionary, and affirming, while 1 Corinthians – while equally pastoral, but with the rod rather than the staff – is more chiding, chastening, and even a little threatening. 1 Corinthians dwells on the first things of faith; 2 Corinthians looks to the deeper mysteries and broader horizons of following Christ.

Paul could not have written 2 Corinthians to the people of 1 Corinthians. By receiving Paul's encouragement and acting on it, they elicited from him the dramatically different message of his second epistle. They took the steps of wisdom and courage he insisted upon in his first epistle, and thus they were restored to the Lord and one another. Paul's encouragement made the difference.

How was he able to do that?

#### *Prerequisites for encouragement*

The apostle Paul was a first-rate encourager. He started many churches, built effective missionary teams, trained men for pastoral ministry, nurtured a mutually-supportive network of missionaries and churches, and communicated effectively with all those God brought into his [Personal Mission Field](#).

I can identify at least five skills that made Paul such an effective encourager. I think we can see these as prerequisites for effective encouragement. Let me summarize briefly.

First, Paul was *attentive to the stirring of God's Spirit* in the churches of Corinth. He knew they'd sent that delegation and letter because of the work of God's Spirit, helping them to recognize their need, long for something better, and seek help. Remember, Paul was always busy, especially (as in 1 Corinthians) when he was charging through open doors, against much opposition, to advance the Gospel (1 Cor. 16.8, 9). He could have put off the delegation and promised to get to the letter when he could find the time. But he recognized in those emissaries and that epistle a sincere stirring of God's Spirit within the soul of the Corinthian church, and he determined to strike while the iron was hot.

Second, and as I mentioned earlier, *Paul loved these people*, and they knew it. He'd spent eighteen months with them, during which he selflessly gave of his time and energy to nurture their souls and build up the body of believers, even in the face of much opposition, and even as he continued to support himself making tents. When the Corinthians decided they needed some help, there was no doubt in their minds where to turn. People are more likely to be encouraged by those who love them, and who *they know* love them.

Third, Paul knew that what was happening in Corinth was *not the way things were supposed to be*. He understood what following Christ involves for individual believers. He knew how God intended His churches to mature and grow. What he was hearing about in Corinth was not in line with God's plan at either level, individual believers or the church as a whole. Paul was never one to let believers or churches rest in some *status quo*, whether that condition was far removed from what God had promised and the Spirit is able to achieve, or advanced and excelling according to the promises of the Lord. Paul knew that there is more, always more, to know, experience, realize, and share of the life of faith than we'll ever attain to in this life; he was determined that he and the people he served would always keep striving for that (Phil. 3.12-15).

Fourth, and related to this, Paul nurtured *a clear and compelling vision* of what the Christian life should be, of what it means to grow in the Lord, to serve in His Name, and to participate in His body as contributing members. He also understood God's plan for His churches, how they should grow in unity and maturity to become more visibly the Body of Christ in their communities (Eph. 4.11-16), and how they must never lose sight of their oneness with other churches (Eph. 4.3). He was not content for the Corinthians to miss out on the blessings God had in store for them, or for the world and the larger Church *through* them. Like all believers, they had been called to the Kingdom and glory of God, and Paul was determined they should realize as much of that as possible (1 Thess. 2.12).

Finally, Paul *spoke the truth in love*. He didn't mince words, when hard words were needed. He was clear about instructions and expectations. He used his words to diagnose, denounce, direct, develop, and dispose the Corinthians to take holy actions to redress their situation and get back in step with the Lord. His closing exhortation to them, in 1 Corinthians 16.13, provides an effective summary and reminder of all he charged them with throughout his first epistle, especially his challenge to them to *be brave*.

#### *The Spirit in, over, and throughout all*

Over and above and through all these prerequisites, Paul knew what the Holy Spirit could do in individual believers (2 Cor. 3.12-18) and in the churches of the Lord (Eph. 4.11-16). He wanted his ministry and any encouragement he might give to line up with and aim for the exceedingly abundantly more of the power at work within us that only the Holy Spirit can provide (Eph. 3.20; Phil. 2.13). Power for fruitfulness (Gal. 5.22, 23). Power for gifted service (1 Cor. 12.7-11). Power for witness (Acts 1.8). Power for building Christ's Church (Eph. 2.19-22). And power for Kingdom growth and progress (1 Cor. 4.20).

Paul brought to the work of encouragement the inward stirring, leading, and empowering of the Holy Spirit in his own life. And when the Spirit at work within him lined up with the Spirit at work within those he sought to encourage, holy spiritual lightning struck, courage and conviction ensued, and good works of love and Kingdom progress broke out all around.

This is the kind of encouragement we need, and that we need to give others.

#### *For reflection*

1. Why do we say that these criteria are *prerequisites* for being able to encourage others?
2. How do you see the Holy Spirit at work in yourself in power? In which aspects of His power do you need to see more evidence of His work in you?
3. When we are encouraged, to what should encouragement lead?

*Next steps – Transformation: Review the prerequisites for being an effective encourager. How can you begin to improve in each of these?*

## 4 A Framework for Encouragement

*I thank my God always concerning you for the grace of God which was given to you by Christ Jesus, that you were enriched in everything by Him in all utterance and all knowledge, even as the testimony of Christ was confirmed in you, so that you come short in no gift, eagerly waiting for the revelation of our Lord Jesus Christ, who will also confirm you to the end, that you may be blameless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. God is faithful, by whom you were called into the fellowship of His Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. 1 Corinthians 1.4-9*

### *The face of encouragement*

To some of us, I suppose a good bit of Paul's encouragement to the churches in Corinth might look more like scolding and threatening.

Well, there is that.

Isn't encouragement supposed to be upbeat, cheerful, and brimming with hope? It can be; but it can also be brutally honest and uncompromising, when necessary. Even when Paul was denouncing the Corinthians' schismatic tendencies, infantile spirituality, and misguided ethics and affections, he was only affirming the work the Holy Spirit had already begun in them already. Why had they written to him and sent a delegation in the first place? They knew things weren't the way they were supposed to be. They were in a mess; but they had neither the wisdom nor courage to do anything about their condition. By Paul's pronouncing negatively on the issues about which they inquired – and some they didn't – he was confirming their sense of need, coming to them on their ground, and putting an arm around them to help them move forward.

Paul was not content to leave them in their mess. One by one, he addressed the issues before them, called on them to repent of their sinful practices, and outlined steps they should take to get back on the path of God's blessing. Encouragement is a very positive discipline; but like all positive disciplines, it can sometimes sting before it starts to heal.

The healing or transformation or progress that encouragement can spark begins in grace, proceeds through action, and focuses squarely on Jesus and becoming more like Him.

### *The foundation of encouragement*

First, then, let's notice from our text where Paul's work of encouragement began: He reminded the Corinthians of who they really were, what they actually possessed, and where they were bound as followers of the Lord Jesus Christ.

They must remember that they were a people of *grace* (1 Cor. 1.4). Grace is a divine disposition; God looks on us with favor. It's also divine communication, by which He advises us of His love. And grace is divine power to move us from where we are to where God wants us to be. Because they were a people of grace, the Corinthians could expect to find renewal and progress beyond anything they'd dared to hope for thus far. They were "enriched in everything" in Jesus, so that they "came short in no gift" (vv. 5, 7). They had everything they needed to move through and beyond their present condition, and Paul would unpack that for them more clearly in subsequent chapters.

Second, he pointed beyond their situation to God Himself. God is faithful, Paul wrote (v. 9). He had called the Corinthians into His fellowship, and had given His own Son to secure it forever. He was not going to let them down. They must not look only upon their own resources to get beyond where they were. They must look to God in faith, knowing that He gives whatever increase is to come as we faithfully do the work He appoints to us (1 Cor. 3.5-9).

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Finally, he reminded them of their root and goal: Jesus Christ. They had made convincing testimony of faith in Him, so that they were *together* rooted and grounded in the Lord Jesus (v. 6). And they were on a journey – individually and together – to becoming more like Jesus, Whom they would one day see face to face (v. 8). Jesus was their starting-point and goal in getting from the mess they were in to the mature body of believers we meet in the opening paragraphs of 1 Clement.

Now that Paul had framed their situation more accurately, he could get on with the work of encouragement they required.

Paul's work of encouragement involved acknowledging their situation, advising them of God's will, and directing them in taking brave and strong (1 Cor. 16.13) actions. The Corinthians must confess and repent of all sin (chaps. 1, 3, 5, 6, 10, 14); look to Jesus and His plan for each believer and every church (chaps. 2, 4, 7, 8, 11, 12, 13, 15); believe that they had everything they needed to move beyond their present condition (chaps. 2, 3, 12, 15); and take the appropriate next steps to resume their proper journey with the Lord (chaps. 5, 7, 8, 12, 13, 14). In addition, Paul promised to come alongside them personally, to review their progress and help them along their way in becoming more like Jesus (16.5-7).

Paul's words to the believers in Corinth – some harsh and admonitory, most loving and forthright and hortatory in nature – met the stirring in their souls, filled them with confidence in the Lord, and gave them the courage to do those things that needed to be done.

#### *The focus of encouragement*

Paul focused the Corinthians off their problems – their failings, weaknesses, shortcomings, lapses, and want of ability – to the Person of our Lord Jesus Christ. By setting Him before them as Savior (chap. 1) and Lord (chap. 15); reminding the Corinthians that they had His mind, (1 Cor. 2.16), belonged to God through Him (1 Cor. 6.19, 20), and participated in Him (1 Cor. 10.16, 17); and calling them to assume their proper place as members in His Body (1 Cor. 12), Paul paved the way for love for Jesus to renew them in love for one another unto the glory of God and benefit of all.

We need encouragement when we need a change of heart that has power to move us beyond our present circumstances into faith-filled actions, leading us to become more like Jesus. This can be like stepping out of a boat onto the water, boldly calling others to consider Jesus, setting aside mere self-interest to seek the benefit of others, or helping someone move into new possibilities for knowing and serving the Lord.

Who of us would not welcome such encouragement! And if we would have others encourage us in this way, we must also learn so to encourage others, for this is the Law and the Prophets, and the way of our Lord Jesus Christ (Matt. 7.12).

#### *For reflection*

1. Why must we focus on Jesus to provide real encouragement to someone?
2. Encouragement sometimes begins by helping someone see their shortcomings, failings, or sins. Why?
3. Encouragement leads to action; people are encouraged when they act differently. How can you see that such encouragement must involve the Holy Spirit of God?

*Next steps – Conversation: Talk with some Christian friends about encouragement. When were they encouraged by someone? What was that like?*

## 5 Encouraged and Encouraging

*Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our tribulation, that we may be able to comfort those who are in any trouble, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God. 2 Corinthians 1.3, 4*

### *God's work*

Paul called the Corinthians to bless God and praise Him for the work of comforting – encouragement, as we are treating this Greek word – that He does in us. Encouragement is the work of God, of His Spirit, Who dwells within us, as He stretches out to move and transform us into the likeness of Jesus Christ. God's ability to encourage us, to infuse courage into our souls so that we move ahead into unfamiliar, uncertain, and even risky places, to seek and advance the Kingdom of our Lord Jesus Christ, is not impeded by any amount of tribulation or trouble. God can encourage us no matter how badly we've messed up, how deeply discouraged we have become, how hopeless things seem, or how unlikely the prospects of change may appear to be.

God is in the business of encouraging His people. You and I are at all times susceptible to discovering God at work within us, infusing us with hope and courage, suggesting new paths or directions, and assuring us that we can walk on water, if that's what it takes to get closer to Jesus and be more like Him.

God the Holy Spirit is the great Encourager. When we bless and praise God for His work of encouragement, we acknowledge that great work; and we put ourselves in a posture of faith, believing God for encouragement and looking to Him for it. In doing so, we open up space in our soul for the Spirit to stir within us in new ways, with new ideas and aspirations, bringing new expressions of His power, to lead us into new areas of loving service.

When the Spirit begins working in us, God will often send someone to encourage us. Other believers encourage us by confirming the Spirit's work, offering a listening ear, suggesting new insights or directions, or offering to help. From such encouragement, the Lord can strike the lightning bolt of courage in our soul, releasing surprising spiritual energy to move us in new directions for the greater realization of God's Kingdom and glory.

This is what Paul did for the Corinthians. Their response to his encouragement in 1 Corinthians was to take positive steps toward renewal and recovery in the Lord. And by the time Paul wrote 2 Corinthians, the process of restoration was well under way. Building on the platform established by their obedience, Paul moved on in 2 Corinthians to hold out even larger horizons and brighter prospects of encouragement for the church in Corinth.

### *Seek the Lord's encouragement*

Each of us is daily presented with opportunities for offering the fruit of God's Spirit to others; taking new steps of faith and obedience that extend Christ's rule in our life sphere; speaking a word of witness about Jesus; taking up some new effort at bringing more beauty, goodness, and truth into our world; or furthering Christ's work of making disciples, building His Church, and advancing His Kingdom on earth as it is in heaven.

But we need to be encouraged if we're ever going to step out of our secure seat onto the uncertain waves where Christ bids us walk to Him. Pray that the Holy Spirit will begin that work of encouragement in you. Listen in silence for Him to convict you of any unconfessed sins. Ask Him for new vision concerning how you might fulfill your calling to the Kingdom and glory of God (1 Thess. 2.12; Matt. 6.33). Pray for specific people and opportunities *each day* where you can show Jesus to whomever God puts in your path. *Seek* the Spirit's work of encouragement; and as He begins to stir within you toward new undertakings and more

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consistent stepping out on the waves, ask God to send you other believers to encourage you. Let their encouragement confirm the Spirit's stretching out in you, and look to them for counsel, assistance, prayer, and guidance in following Jesus courageously.

#### *Be ready to encourage*

Paul was greatly encouraged by the way the churches in Corinth responded to his encouragement. He took the opportunity of their encouraging him to encourage them boldly with words of higher aspiration and hope: that they might become a true fragrance of Jesus in the world (2.15, 16); that others would "read" in them a true epistle of Jesus (3.1-3); that the glory of God would transform them increasingly into the image of the Lord Jesus (3.12-18); that others might give thanks to God because of their faithfulness (4.7-12); that they might focus more consistently on the glory of the Lord Jesus at the Father's right hand (4.6; 5.1-10), and might take their place as ambassadors for Jesus Christ, restoring the reconciled world to God (5.12-21); that they might press on to bring holiness to completion in the fear of God (7.1); and that they might have courage to share generously with the suffering church in Judea (9.1-15).

These were bold words, and Paul might have held back from venturing them, for fear of frightening the Corinthians back into some condition of withdrawn infancy. But the encouragement he received from them gave him the courage to urge them to press on to even greater heights of obedience, service, love, and glory than they had thus far realized.

And the opening paragraphs of Clement's first epistle to the Corinthians is the evidence that Paul's second round of encouragement gave them even greater courage for growth and ministry than the first.

As God encourages us, we must make ourselves available to encourage others. The lack of mutual encouragement in the Church today is one of the greatest reasons why Christianity has become a marginal faith in our society, and why unbelief, paganism, and other false religions have occupied so much of the social and cultural ground of our society.

God's people are languishing in forms of spiritual infancy that are leaving us turned inward, anxious over our increasingly secular age, and powerless to assert the righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit that are the signs of the Kingdom of God (Rom. 14.17, 18)

We need to recover the art of encouragement, so that having the courage to do what is right and good and true and Kingdom-advancing becomes more the way we live as Christians in the world. And we need to make the most of every opportunity to encourage our fellow Christians as well.

#### *For reflection*

1. How did Paul's encouragement affect the church in Corinth?
2. How did their response to his encouragement encourage him?
3. What can you do to begin realizing more the Spirit's work of encouragement in your walk with and work for the Lord?

*Next steps – Preparation: Pray for the Spirit to begin stirring with encouragement in you. Ask Him to show you new ways of bringing Christ's Kingdom to light in your life and your Personal Mission Field.*

## 6 More and More

*Finally then, brethren, we urge and exhort in the Lord Jesus that you should abound more and more, just as you received from us how you ought to walk and to please God; for you know what commandments we gave you through the Lord Jesus. 1*

Thessalonians 4.1, 2

### *An exemplary church*

In many ways, the church in Thessalonica was the exact opposite of the church in Corinth. Whereas the latter was in a mess, and hardly exemplary to anyone, Paul held up the Thessalonians as an example to churches everywhere of what God could do with a people who truly trusted in Him and took His Word seriously.

Here was a church which embraced its calling from God to His Kingdom and glory (1 Thess. 2.12). For Paul, it was not enough that *he* should refract the glory of God or know the joy of His Kingdom. True, he sought these at all times and in all things. But he labored to see glory and joy in others as visible manifestations and evidence of the work of God's Spirit through his ministry (1 Thess. 2.1). He regarded the glory and joy others came to know through his ministry as the crowning achievement and proof of God's work through him (1 Thess. 2.2-8, 19).

What evidence of faith and the glory of God did Paul see in the Thessalonians? He cited their "work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ" (1.3). They understood that working out the salvation to which they had come in Jesus meant doing good works of love and promoting a common hope in the Lord and unto His glory.

Further, they right away got busy about the work of making known the Good News of Jesus: "...from you the word of the Lord has sounded forth, not only in Macedonia and Achaia, but also in every place. Your faith toward God has gone out, so that we do not need to say anything" (1.8).

The Thessalonians eagerly sought to learn what was required of them as a community of believers, and devoted themselves to becoming such: "...when you received the word of God which you heard from us, you welcomed *it* not *as* the word of men, but as it is in truth, the word of God, which also effectively works in you who believe. For you, brethren, became imitators of the churches of God which are in Judea in Christ Jesus. For you also suffered the same things from your own countrymen, just as they *did* from the Judeans..." (2.13, 14).

They were hungry to become disciples of Jesus and Paul: "...just as you received from us how you ought to walk and to please God; for you know what commandments we gave you through the Lord Jesus" (4.1, 2).

And they abounded in love for one another, which is the true mark and end of Christian faith: "But concerning brotherly love you have no need that I should write to you, for you yourselves are taught by God to love one another; and indeed you do so toward all the brethren who are in all Macedonia" (4.9, 10).

Everything in Thessalonica was going great guns, and that in spite of "much affliction" (1.6). So, time to sit back and rest on the old laurels a bit, no?

No.

### *Abound more and more*

Obviously the Spirit was at work among the churches in Thessalonica. Paul had seen it, and Timothy had just come from there with a report that all was continuing in grace and flourishing in the salvation of the Lord among the churches in that city (3.6). Paul determined, as much as he could in a brief letter, to try to effect

another lightning strike of spiritual energy in this vibrant and vital congregation.

Paul saw an opportunity to encourage the Thessalonians, and he wrote, “we urge and exhort in the Lord Jesus that you should abound more and more” (4.1) And just to make sure his word of encouragement wasn’t lost on them, he charged them all with carrying on the work of encouragement among themselves: “Therefore encourage one another with these words.” “Therefore, encourage each other and edify one another, just as you also are doing” (4.18 and 5.11, my translations).

And he set a standard of increasing growth and ministry toward which they should aspire and for which they should earnestly strive: “But we urge you, brethren, that you increase more and more...” “And may the Lord make you increase and abound in love to one another and to all...” (4.10, 12).

And why not? Paul acknowledged the Lord’s work amongst them, celebrating with exuberant rejoicing the evidence of His Spirit at work within them. But he knew there was more, always more – exceedingly abundantly more (Eph. 3.20) – we can all experience and express of the glory and power of the Lord, at work within us to will and do of God’s pleasure (Phil. 2.13); and he longed for the Thessalonians to know that as well.

*Next steps*

So, after reassuring them about the return of the Lord (4.13-18), Paul set about with specific words of exhortation to outline actions they could take to encourage and edify one another (1 Thessalonians 5). They should persevere in faith, love, and the hope of salvation (v. 8); honor those who serve and instruct them, and love them dearly (vv. 12, 13); treat one another as the situation required for holiness and love (vv. 14, 15); rejoice and pray and give thanks and walk in the Spirit, testing everything and holding fast to whatever was good, while turning away from everything that was evil (vv. 16-22).

Paul saw an opportunity to keep the Thessalonians moving forward in the faith, and he did not hold back from offering as much encouragement as he could. He wanted them to excel and abound more and more, because he knew we are all capable, in the Lord, of such growth and fruitfulness.

And he assured them that, as they took up the challenges he put before them, God would be faithful, and would enable them to realize even more of their great salvation (5.24).

It’s too easy for us to become satisfied with the state of our walk with and work for the Lord. We need to encourage one another to excel and abound and increase more and more, because there is always more and more of our great salvation to know, enjoy, embody, and proclaim.

*For reflection*

1. What would “more and more” look like in your life?
2. Why must we resist the tendency ever to think that our experience of Jesus is “good enough”?
3. What can you learn from Paul about the work of encouraging your fellow believers?

*Next steps – Transformation: Whom will you encourage today in their walk with and work for the Lord?*

## 7 Encouragement Indirect and Direct

*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—therefore, brethren, in all our affliction and distress we were comforted concerning you by your faith. For now we live, if you stand fast in the Lord.* 1 Thessalonians 3.6-8

### *Even Paul*

We don't typically think of strong believers like Paul as needing encouragement. Don't they have a direct line to the Lord? Indeed, as do we all. But we are so created and redeemed as to *require* encouragement from one another, and we see that clearly in Paul's response to Timothy's report about the state of matters in Thessalonica.

It's difficult for us to imagine how great Paul's concern for the Thessalonians must have been. He prayed for them continually (1 Thess. 1.2), shared in their sufferings (1 Thess. 2.14-16) to the point of being afflicted and in distress (1 Thess. 3.7); he longed to see them again and to make sure of their wellbeing (1 Thess. 2.17-20); and finally, when he "could no longer endure it," he sent his trusted colleague Timothy to encourage them, and to learn about their condition, hoping and praying as he did that he would find the Thessalonians unshaken and steadfast (1 Thess. 3.1-3).

Timothy could not have brought a better report for Paul's encouragement. The Thessalonians were standing fast in faith and love (1 Thess. 3.6), and they fondly remembered and eagerly longed for Paul, as he did for them. Paul was greatly encouraged (*παρεκλήθημεν*, comforted NKJV) by this news. I prefer the translation encouraged here, because Paul didn't merely breathe a sigh of relief and say, "Thank You, Lord." He was emboldened to act on the Thessalonians' behalf, both to be revived in his own faith and to write these epistles to encourage the Thessalonians to press on to a greater measure of salvation and life.

Imagine for a moment how pleased Timothy must have been to see Paul so encouraged by his report. The Thessalonians provided *indirect* encouragement to Paul; Timothy's report was the *direct* encouragement that prompted Paul to write this glowing epistle. Doubtless, Paul's glad response would have greatly encouraged Timothy as well.

Let's take a closer look at how Timothy's encouragement affected Paul.

### *Standing fast*

Verse 8 is almost unfathomably deep. We cannot in this space unpack everything that Paul intends here, but we must consider at least a few matters, for they show us the powerful role encouragement can play in our lives.

First, note how Paul says "we live" because the Thessalonians stand fast in the Lord. How invested was Paul in the people he served? Gladly, he told the Corinthians, he would "spend and be spent" for their souls (2 Cor. 12.15). How he loved these people, though he barely knew them! But they had come to Jesus under his ministry, and now they were part of him, embedded in his heart; they were a source of joy, purpose, and resolve by their believing and standing fast in the Lord. Paul might just as well have written, concerning his response to Timothy's report, "We are revived!"

Do we love people like this? Love them so much that we weep while they remain outside the Lord, or sorrow when they falter in the faith, or rejoice and are encouraged as we see them growing in the Lord? The Lord has made us His people and members of His Body, and we are meant to derive strength and life from one another (Heb. 10.24; Gal. 6.1, 2, 10), and to give these to one another as well. We are vessels through whom

the Lord flows His life to others. Pray that God will help you love like Paul. And let those you love, as they grow in the Lord, be a constant source of encouragement to you.

But there is a note of tenuousness here. Timothy had made a good report, and Paul rejoiced. But standing fast in the Lord is a lifetime commitment, an every day and every moment calling. Paul says “now we live, *if* you live” (emphasis added). The sense of the Greek: *ἐάν*, “if”, is more like, “and it’s possible that it might not be so.” Just because the Thessalonians had stood fast for the time was no guarantee they would stand fast for the duration. Paul’s letter meant to encourage them to do so.

We must always pay attention to our lives and how we spend our time (Eph. 5.15-17). Just when we think we’re standing firm, we can fall precipitously, calamitously, and eternally (1 Cor. 10.12; 2 Tim. 4.9; Heb. 6.4-6). Is Paul suggesting that we can lose our salvation? No, but he is cautioning us against being overly confident on the basis of a few indications of faith in the past. We must be always pressing on, always standing firm, always seeking the Kingdom and glory of God, or we may someday discover, in spite of all our shocked protestations, that the Lord never knew us, because we never truly knew Him (Matt. 7.21-23).

More is at stake than just our own status as followers of Christ. Just as our walk with and work for the Lord can be a great encouragement to others, even indirectly, so we can be a source of *discouragement* to our fellow believers if we falter, stumble, or grow lazy in following Jesus.

*Just-in-time encouragement*

Paul probably wrote his letter to the Thessalonians while he was ministering in Corinth. The work in Corinth was a challenge, with much opposition and affliction. So demanding was that work, that the Lord Jesus Himself appeared to Paul in a vision to encourage him to stay the course (Acts 18.9-11). Paul needed all the encouragement he could get to keep ministering the Word about Jesus as opposition continued to mount against him.

Timothy’s return to Paul from Thessalonica was like a fresh breath of the Spirit, filling the lungs of his soul. It was the just-in-time encouragement he needed to press on for eighteen months in Corinth. And he would continue to be encouraged as long as he knew that the Thessalonians were standing fast in the Lord.

God has sent His Spirit into our hearts as the Encourager (*ὁ παράκλητος*). His work is to infuse our hearts with courage to overcome fears, anxiousness, doubts, reluctance, complacency, and indifference, to transform us into the image of Jesus Christ and equip and move us for good works. And it pleases the Spirit to do His work, at least in part, through us, as we encourage one another as Timothy and the Thessalonians did Paul.

*For reflection*

1. Why do you think we all need encouragement in our walk with and work for the Lord?
2. We can’t know when our encouragement of another believer will be “just-in-time”, so we need to be ready at all times to offer words of encouragement. Explain.
3. Do you think Timothy’s coming to check-up on the Thessalonians would have encouraged them? Explain.

*Next steps – Preparation: Meditate on Hebrews 10.24. Spend some time in prayer asking the Lord to put before your mind every opportunity for encouraging another believer that you might have today. Commit yourself to giving that encouragement as the Lord leads.*

*Encouragement and the Church*

*Questions for reflection or discussion*

1. How would you describe the nature of Paul's encouragement to the Corinthians?
2. What was Paul encouraging them to do? Why did they need courage to do this?
3. Why was Paul encouraged by Timothy's report from Thessalonica?
4. How did he further encourage the Thessalonians?
5. What's the most important lesson you've learned from this part of our study on encouragement?

*For prayer:*

## The Fellowship of Ailbe

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