

# BARRIERS TO ENCOURAGEMENT



ENCOURAGEMENT (6)

T. M. MOORE

A REVISION STUDY FROM  
THE FELLOWSHIP OF AILBE

Barriers to Encouragement  
Encouragement (6)  
T. M. Moore  
Susie Moore, Editor and Finisher

Copyright, 2021 T. M. and Susie Moore  
The Fellowship of Ailbe

*Except as indicated, Scripture taken from the New King James Version. © Copyright 1982 by Thomas Nelson, Inc. Used by permission. All rights reserved. Cover image: Yahoo images.*

*Barriers to Encouragement*

Contents

Welcome to <i>Barriers to Encouragement</i>	4
1 Unwillingness	5
2 Limiting God's Power	8
3 Deaf to His Call	11
4 Doubting God's Word	13
5 Fear of the Unknown	15
6 Lack of Experience	18
7 Unconnected	21
Questions for Reflection or Discussion	24

## Welcome to *Barriers to Encouragement*

We all need encouragement, and we're all called to encourage our brethren in the Lord. We've looked at many facets of encouragement and have seen why it's so important as a work of God's Spirit in and through us.

Still, we put up barriers to being encouraged, and these same barriers keep us from encouraging others. We need to make sure we recognize these, so that we can overcome and get on with this important work.

*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.

We're happy to provide this study at no charge. If you find these studies helpful, we hope you'll consider sending a gift to The Fellowship of Ailbe, to help us in making these resources available to others.

And if you find this study helpful, please let us know. How have you benefited from this study? Go to our website, [www.ailbe.org](http://www.ailbe.org), and use the Contact Us button to share your story.

May the Lord bless your study of His Word.

T. M. Moore  
Principal

## 1 Unwillingness

*“Therefore be very courageous to keep and to do all that is written in the Book of the Law of Moses...”* Joshua 23.6

### *Our greatest need*

I am persuaded that the greatest need of the people of God is courage. This is why God sent His Holy Spirit – the Encourager – into our hearts, so that, in Him and His power, we might go beyond ourselves day by day in laying hold on the precious and very great promises of God which are in Jesus Christ (2 Cor. 1.20; 2 Pet. 1.4).

Joshua called the leaders and people of Israel to “be very courageous,” for unless they were, they would give in to their fears, doubt God’s as-yet-unrealized promises, and just hunker down in their new homes and hope for the best. Courage is a disposition of the heart – from which flow the issues of life (Prov. 4.23) – which enables us to overcome fear, banish doubt, nurture hope and faith, and step forward into new challenges in the life of faith.

In Joshua’s day, the land of Canaan had been conquered, but it was not yet subdued. In our day, the fallen, sin-wracked world has been reconciled to God by the work of our Lord Jesus Christ; but it has not yet been restored to its goodness for His glory (2 Cor. 5.18, 19; Heb. 2.5-9).

By embracing our calling to the Kingdom and glory of God (1 Thess. 2.12), looking steadily to Jesus, and submitting to the Spirit’s work of encouragement, we can expect to be made willing and able to do exceedingly abundantly more than we have ever dared to ask or think in knowing, loving, and serving our glorious Lord and King (Phil. 2.13; Eph. 3.20). Every believer should follow the example of the apostle Paul in pressing on to realize more of this upward calling of God in Christ Jesus (Phil. 3.12-15).

It takes courage to be a follower of Jesus Christ, and He has appointed each one of us to submit to the courage-giving work of His Spirit and to encourage one another in our walk with and work for the Lord.

But we need to realize that certain barriers can arise – in those we seek to encourage as well as in ourselves – that can keep this great work from going forward. By recognizing those barriers, we can look to Jesus and draw on the power of His Spirit to move on to more of the full and abundant life He offers.

In this final installment of our series on encouragement, we’ll examine a few of the barriers that keep us from being encouraged or from encouraging others, and we’ll consider the best ways of overcoming those barriers so that we may be strong and very courageous in following the Lord.

### *Complacency*

Perhaps the most common barrier to encouragement we’ll have to overcome is simply being unwilling to be encouraged or to encourage others. We know that God has called us to this work, and that He has given us His Spirit to encourage us in following Him. So why isn’t more work of encouragement going on in the Body of Christ today? Why aren’t we more courageous in following Jesus in all the ways we have previously considered?

Jesus recognized this barrier of unwillingness in His own day: “O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the one who kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to her! How often I wanted to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under *her* wings, but you were not willing!” (Matt. 23.37)

Not willing. What a terrible place to be when the Lord of life, the King of joy, the Prince of peace, and the Majesty on high is calling you to participate in Him and His work of making all things new! Unless we are

willing to be encouraged, we will not make much progress in the life of faith.

I had to learn this lesson early on in my walk with the Lord. For a full year after receiving Christ, I resisted the encouragement of my friend, Rick Duwe, to spend time with Jesus in His Word, take up the work of prayer, and fully embrace His calling for my life. Rick would often ask me about my time with the Lord, but I always had some excuse for why I hadn't gotten around to it yet. Then one day he confronted me in the student union, and once again asked if I had started reading the Word each day. I gave the usual lame excuse, but then added, "I really want to, though." Rick jumped on that: "No, you don't. You don't want to spend time with the Lord." I protested, "Come on, what Christian doesn't want to spend time with the Lord?" Rick jabbed his finger into my sternum as he said, "You don't!" Then he put an arm around me and said, "T. M., we will do in this life only and exactly what we want to do, and nothing else. And when you want to spend time with Jesus, you will."

That challenge was what I needed to begin seeking the Lord daily in His Word and prayer. It's fifty years on from that moment, and I remember it as if it was yesterday.

And when we want to live courageously for Jesus, when we truly desire to lay hold on His precious and very great promises, to be transformed into His likeness, and to live as His witnesses – when we truly *want* this, then we will be *willing* for the Encourager to take us there.

*The desires of our heart*

Psalm 37.4 offers what seems to me the most encouraging promise in all of Scripture: "Delight yourself also in the LORD, and He shall give you the desires of your heart." God promises to give us the desires of our heart, whatever we might want, exceedingly abundantly beyond all that we've ever dared to ask or think! There's just one condition: We must delight ourselves in the LORD. That is, we must seek Him in His Word, so that we grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ (Jn. 5.39; 2 Pet. 3.18). The more we see Jesus in Scripture, and the more intimately and constantly we commune with Him in prayer, the more we will delight in Him. Delighting in Him, we will hear Him, and desire to follow Him in all His ways. His Spirit will encourage us to seek more of Him. Our heart will be filled with the sense of His beauty, the greatness of His love, the purity of His goodness, and the reliability of His Word.

And when that begins to happen, when Jesus is the delight of our lives, He will be the desire of our hearts. We will want nothing so much as Jesus and His Kingdom and righteousness. And He will give that to us, more and more.

But we must be willing. Jesus can encourage us to a bolder, more consistent, and more fruitful walk with Him; and He can use us to encourage others to the same. But we must be willing. We must not be those of whom Jesus says, "I longed to encourage you, but you would not." We must rather be those who, like Isaiah, trembling before the might and glory of God, say day by day to Jesus, "Here am I; send me" (Is. 6.8).

Pray that Jesus will make you willing to be encouraged, to be made daily more courageous for Him, and that He will use you to encourage others as well. The Spirit Who dwells in us can make us *willing* and *able* to follow Jesus courageously. But He is looking to see if we are willing.

*For reflection*

1. How can you know if you are willing to be encouraged and to encourage others?
2. What does it mean to delight in the Lord? How would you counsel a new believer to begin delighting in the Lord?
3. Why is courage the great need of this or any day for the followers of Christ?

*Barriers to Encouragement*

*Next steps – Preparation: Meditate on the Lord in silence, asking Him to search your heart and to make you willing to be encouraged and to encourage others in your walk with and work for Him.*

## 2 Limiting God's Power

*"Then I will also confess to you  
That your own right hand can save you."* Job 40.14

*Jesus answered and said to them, "You are mistaken, not knowing the Scriptures nor the power of God."* Matthew 22.29

*Job's problem...*

Job had a problem, but it's not the problem that is most obvious. Job's *trial* was that he had lost his children, wealth, and wellbeing. His friends had turned on him in a most dismissive manner. And even his wife seemed to have given up hope for his recovery.

This was Job's trial. But it wasn't his problem. Job's *problem* was that he could not figure out why he had been subjected to this *trial*, and he was persuaded that he had every right to know, and that God owed him an explanation.

In chapter 28, having rebuffed his friends and their pop-theology approach to his trial, Job turned to God. He knew that God understood his problem. God knows everything, and He promised that those who fear Him – as Job certainly did – would have wisdom and understanding as well (Job 28.23-28). But he felt as if God had abandoned him (29.1ff). Life was good when God was with him, caring for and watching over him by His power. But now, that was all done (chapter 30), and Job was bitter. His trial was getting the best of him, and God was shedding no light on the matter. Had he fallen out of the power of God? Had God decided to ignore him and withhold His providential care (30.20ff)? Job reasoned that, if he had done anything to deserve all this suffering, then by all means, let it come (31.13ff). But if not, he deserved an explanation.

Job demanded a fair hearing from God (31.35ff). He wanted an audience with the Almighty, where he would declare his innocence and demand an explanation for his trial.

Job's problem, as he saw it, was that he did not have the understanding of his trial that he *knew* God had, but that God was for some reason withholding from him. And Job was operating out of a skewed view of the power of God, one that considered that God's power ought always to work the way he thought it should.

Job's problem was that he failed to perceive the vast scope, infinite majesty, constant working, and ultimately mysterious ways of the wisdom and power of God. And thus he was limiting the power of God.

*...and ours*

Jesus might have said to Job what He said to those religious leaders who tried to catch Him in a theological puzzle: Job, you don't understand the power of God, because you do not know the Word of God.

Job's problem is often ours. Though our trials may not be as severe as Job's, like him, we tend to think that the power of God only operates according to our understanding of things. The religious leaders who accosted Jesus thought themselves quite clever and knowledgeable about the Scriptures. But you can know the Scriptures inside-out, and you can be abundantly blessed more than any person on earth, and you can still limit the power of God.

We limit the power of God when we think it ought to be wielded only according to our puny understanding of things divine and mysterious. The power of God, we think, ought to keep us safe and happy, take care of all our needs, and not require of us more than we're comfortable undertaking. The power of God, that is, should be predictable, safe, and beneficial.

## *Barriers to Encouragement*

The power of God is always beneficial, but it's not always predictable or safe. If we believed that the power of God – for example, the power promised to make us witnesses for Jesus Christ, or to enable us to obey and teach His Law – is *always* beneficial – for His glory, our enrichment, and the blessing of others – wouldn't we be more ready and eager to acquire and exercise that power, whether or not it was predictable or safe?

Following Jesus is not always safe. Sometimes doing what Jesus calls us to do in serving Him can lead us into unpredictable situations, where we need to be constantly in communion with Him to know where He's leading.

And where we may be subjected to trials we otherwise might not choose.

But the power of Jesus is always beneficial. It is always at work to do that which is according to the pleasure of the Lord (Phil. 2.13). And it is always able to do in and through us exceedingly abundantly more than we have ever dared to ask or think (Eph. 3.20). We limit the power of God by thinking of it in our terms rather than His.

God set Job straight about the enormity and mystery of His power, and all its beneficial applications, by a whirlwind tour of creation and the ways God's power works to keep it all going. Jesus corrected the religious leaders' ignorance of God's power by further teaching from His Word. If we are limiting the full scope, majestic sweep, illimitable applications, and transforming mystery of the power of God, we need to look more deeply into the Word of God and pay more attention to the world around us.

### *This way to greater faith*

And then we need to pray and call upon the Lord to give us a bigger vision of the possibilities for knowing, loving, and serving Him. Cry out to Him to fill us with His Spirit continually, so that we walk by faith and not by sight, and in the power of God's Spirit rather than the puniness of our own strength. Like Peter, we need to seek God for things exceedingly abundantly above all we ever dared to ask or think, and to grant His power to be at work in us, making us willing and able to step out onto the waves of life.

Then we need to act as the Lord leads, taking small but constant steps in the direction God is leading, resting in His power and promises for the courage we need to restore our part of the reconciled world. Let the power of God that holds the cosmos together, raised Jesus from the dead, and flows to us from His Word do its transforming work in you as you obey the Lord's encouragement to follow Him each day.

Then, when God meets you with His power, and you respond to His encouragement, be sure to give Him thanks and praise, and to bear witness to His greatness and power, just like Job did (Job 42.1-6).

When the Spirit of God is encouraging you to do something new or different or more than before, be assured that He has the power to do what He is calling you to do. He will meet you in your prayers and next steps to give the courage and power to fulfill whatever He is calling you to do. You may not always know how that's going to work out, and it might even be a little risky; but the power of God that encourages and moves you to obedience always acts in ways that benefit us and glorify Him. Keep focused on that, and you'll be less likely to limit His power when He comes to exert it through you.

### *For reflection*

1. How was Job limiting the power of God? What about the religious leaders who confronted Jesus?
2. What are some ways we limit the power of God in our walk with and work for Him?
3. How do prayer and obedience work to tap into the power of God for courage to follow Him?

*Barriers to Encouragement*

*Next Step – Transformation: Where is Jesus calling you to follow Him boldly today? Prepare for this in prayer, then plan the next steps you'll take in obeying Him.*

### 3 Deaf to His Call

*But as God has distributed to each one, as the Lord has called each one, so let him walk...Let each one remain in the same calling in which he was called.* 1 Corinthians 7.17, 20

*...you would walk worthy of God who calls you into His own kingdom and glory.* 1 Thessalonians 2.12

*"[As you are going] therefore, make disciples..."* Matthew 28.19

#### *Called and sent*

The New Testament is abundantly clear on two matters that concern every follower of Jesus Christ.

Each of us has a *calling*, and each of us is *sent*. That is, we have something we're moving *toward* because Someone has *sent* us to it and expects us to be faithful in even the little things that calling entails.

That is, God Himself speaks to every believer, calling us by name, assuring us that we are His, and indicating His plan and purpose for our lives (Is. 43.1; Matt. 5.13-16). God's calling could not be more clear: Enter, seek, and advance His Kingdom and glory in every aspect of your calling in life. Whatever your calling – your work, your life-setting, your relationships, roles, and responsibilities, what Paul calls your "condition" – God sends you to seek His Kingdom and righteousness and to live for His glory (Matt. 6.33; 1 Cor. 10.31).

Being a Christian is thus a full-time *calling*. We need the courage only God's Spirit can give us to work for His Kingdom and glory in every facet and setting of our lives, all the time.

In that calling, God *sends* us each day as Jesus was sent to this world. Jesus was sent to the world to embody, work for, and proclaim the Kingdom of God, that realm of righteousness, peace, and joy in the Spirit where Jesus is making all things new, restoring the reconciled world for the glory of God and the blessing of the world. He has sent us – everyone who believes in Him – with the same mission (Jn. 20.21). We are to embody, seek, work for, and proclaim the rule of King Jesus in the calling and condition God has appointed to us, making disciples of the people around us as we go about our daily tasks and duties.

Certainly, we will need great courage to carry out this calling. This is a supernatural calling; it puts demands on us that we cannot satisfy apart from the power and courage of God. The Spirit of God can give us this courage, and He can use each of us to encourage one another to excel still more in every facet of our lives for the Kingdom and glory of God. Living this calling and pursuing this mission makes for full and abundant life in Jesus, life exceedingly abundantly beyond what we've ever thought possible, life in the power and unto the pleasure of God.

But not if we're deaf to our calling, or if we otherwise resist embracing it.

#### *Deaf to your calling?*

To look at many Christians, we might conclude that the Christian life consists of going to church, perhaps being part of a small group or other church activity, and maybe spending some time in Bible reading and prayer during the week. Very many Christians live their faith in niches or segments or time slots. They believe their calling, such as it is, involves nothing more than making a little time for God in their busy lives. Many of them are decent people who work hard and care for their own.

But you wouldn't describe them as disciple-makers. Or witnesses for Jesus. Or you would not expect them to be constantly thinking and working to extend the rule of King Jesus into all areas and aspects of their life

### *Barriers to Encouragement*

spheres. Making disciples is what pastors do, right? Being a witness for Jesus is the calling of those who have the “gift of evangelism.” And in the “worldly” spheres of their lives – work, recreation, community life, and so forth – the rules that govern their behavior insist that they keep their religion to themselves. They don’t want to offend anyone, or risk being the object of someone’s wrath, so they go along to get along, thus validating the world’s view that religion is a “private matter.”

Believers who live this way are either deaf to the clear calling of God, outlined above, or they refuse to embrace God’s calling and reserve the right to define their Christianity on their own terms, rather than His. Or maybe no one ever taught them that following Jesus demands their *all* – all their time, all their strength, all their attention and focus, and all their exertions.

We don’t need the courage of God to live this niche-based, time-slotted way. After all, we only show our Christian colors when we’re among like-minded others; so we can be safe singing hymns, listening to sermons, sharing Bible thoughts, doing good works, or joining others in prayer. Such an approach to Christian life doesn’t require much courage.

#### *Embrace your calling*

Our lives are brimming with opportunities to glorify God, speak a word of witness, do good works, and show the beauty and goodness of the Lord. But if we’re going to live for Christ every moment, in every situation, seeking the beauty, goodness, truth, righteousness, peace, and joy of His Kingdom in everything you do, and with every person you know, then we’re going to need courage. Because being a witness for Jesus and working to realize His Kingdom on earth as it is in heaven is not only *not* natural to us, it can be offensive to those in the world who do not know the Lord. It takes courage to live this way. Jesus understands that, and He has sent His Encourager to dwell within us, so that we might break out of our niche-Christian lives into bearing witness, making disciples, and living for His glory in all aspects of our calling.

Have you embraced your calling from the Lord? Are you focused on bringing the Kingdom and righteousness of Jesus to bear on every person, in every situation, at every opportunity, every day of your life? This is what we’re called to, and it’s what we can realize increasingly, as we rest in the courage and power of the Spirit of God and go in obedient faith throughout our day.

The Lord can give us the courage to live more completely and more fully for Him. And as we do, we’ll be able to encourage other believers to do the same.

#### *For reflection*

1. What do we mean by “niche-Christianity” or a “time-slotted” faith? Why is this not what the Lord has in mind for us?
2. What does it mean to have a “calling” from God? To be “sent” like Jesus was sent?
3. Why do we need courage to live this “called-and-sent” way of life? How can we receive that courage?

*Next Step – Preparation: If you have not mapped out your Personal Mission Field, watch this brief video ([click here](#)), then download the worksheet and get started today.*

## 4 Doubting God's Word

*And immediately Jesus stretched out His hand and caught him, and said to him, "O you of little faith, why did you doubt?"*  
Matthew 14.31

### *The nature of doubt*

Along with being unwilling to follow Jesus according to His Word, failing to understand and thus limiting God's power, and being ignorant of His calling, doubting God and His Word can also keep us from having the courage we need to live as witnesses for Christ and ambassadors of His Kingdom.

The *OED* offers several helpful definitions of this verb: feel uncertain about; question the truth or fact of something; and disbelieve or lack faith in someone. We can see each of these at work in Peter as he walked on the Sea of Galilee toward Jesus.

As long as he kept his eyes fixed on Jesus, he did that which he had never done before, and which took a measure of courage that could only have come from God. But as the winds roared and the waves mounted, Peter began to feel uncertain about his ability to do what he was doing. He questioned the wisdom of trying to walk on the sea. And he began to disbelieve in both himself and the Lord.

All these doubts Jesus observed as Peter took his eyes off Him, looked at the sea, raging all around, and began to sink. Jesus "stretched out His hand and caught him", thus demonstrating the power of grace to overcome doubt. Then He explained Peter's failure of courage to continue the course he had begun: he doubted the Lord and His Word.

Doubt is a barrier to the courage we need to follow Jesus in our calling. Doubt doesn't have to be spoken to be real. Doubt will cause us to lose sight of Jesus amid the whirl and maelstrom of fear, unbelief, distraction, and feelings of uncertainty and unlikelihood that come over us as we begin to take courage from the Lord. Doubt will question the promises of God's Word. Doubt wants to rationalize the Word of God into something manageable, familiar, and safe. Doubt reminds you that you've never done anything like this before. Doubt deals out a hand of problems, challenges, and worst-case-scenarios, leading you to say, "I pass." Doubt causes fear or unease to rise in your heart. Doubt makes you think less of yourself than Jesus does. Doubt will freeze you in your tracks in your walk with and work for the Lord.

All because doubt makes you take your eyes off Jesus and turn them instead to the things you fear.

### *The antidote to doubt*

The antidote to doubt is to look to Jesus. Peter doubted that he could walk on the sea: "Lord, if it is You, command me to come to You on the water" (Matt. 14.28). Don't miss that *if*. He knew he could not walk on the water in anything like his own strength. But *if* Jesus commanded him, then perhaps he could do so. Doubt and possibility were churning within Peter until the moment Jesus said to him, "Come" (v. 29).

Then, his eyes fixed on Jesus, courage overcame doubt, possibility strapped on faith and hope, and Peter's body moved in obedience to his soul toward the Master, gesturing to him upon the waves.

The way to keep doubt in check is to see Jesus.

Paul wrote, "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me" (Phil. 4.13). How could he be so confident of this? All things? Really? Paul certainly experienced that strength in many ways. He was able to endure hardship, stand boldly before kings and governors, witness to Jesus before the philosophers of

### *Barriers to Encouragement*

Athens, fight with beasts, and preach the Gospel where no one had preached it before. We will grant, I'm sure, that such endeavors took courage that could only come from the Spirit of God, willing and doing according to the pleasure of God, exceedingly abundantly beyond what Paul had ever before dared to ask or think (Phil. 2.13; Eph. 3.20).

And here is Paul's challenge to us: "Imitate me, just as I also *imitate* Christ" (1 Cor. 11.1). In all these courageous undertakings, Paul was only imitating what he saw in Jesus, not only in what he had learned of Jesus' earthly sojourn, but His reign in glory, seated at the right hand of the Father, holding the vast cosmos in place, doing all things according to the counsel of His will, and filling the world with Himself (Col. 3.1-3; Col. 1.16, 17; Eph. 1.11; Eph. 1.22, 23). And of His coming again to bring in the fullness of the Kingdom and destroy our last enemy, death (1 Cor. 15). Jesus had commanded Paul to serve Him. Paul took Him at His Word, following Him into new and uncertain situations, courageously determined to live and die for Jesus.

The more we see of Jesus, the more the Encourager within us will transform us into the likeness of Christ, so that we may realize His strength at work in and through us to live as His witnesses for Christ and ambassadors of His Kingdom, restoring the reconciled world to God (2 Cor. 3.12-18).

#### *The power of vision*

While Peter's mind was filled with the vision of Jesus, glorious and unfazed by winds and waves, he did not doubt that he could imitate Jesus and walk on the sea. When he doubted, looking away from Jesus at the uncertain world around him, then his faith faltered and his walk began to sink.

We will be less likely to feel uncertain about our calling; question the truth or facts of God's Word and promises; and disbelieve or lack faith in Jesus if we practice the discipline of setting our minds on the Lord Jesus – as He was during His incarnation, as He is now at the Father's right hand, and as He will be in glorious victory when He comes again.

The grace of Jesus can overcome your doubts and create that lightning charge of encouragement that will enable you to say with Paul, "I can do all things through Christ Who strengthens me." Indeed, Jesus is reaching out to us at every moment, calling us to walk above this world's *Sturm und Drang* and stretching out His hand for us to join Him in making all things new. But we won't know the grace that gives us courage if our mind and heart are occupied with the things of this world, rather than the things of Christ.

"Set your mind on things above, not on things on the earth." "Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus..." "I press toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus. Therefore let us, as many as are mature, have this mind..." (Col. 3.2; Phil. 2.5; Phil. 3.14, 15).

Do not underestimate the power of vision. What you see is what you'll live toward and what you'll get. See Jesus, and then see how He can embolden your life with the courage to do whatever He calls you to do.

#### *For reflection*

1. What do you think David meant in Psalm 16.8? How would you counsel a new believer to do that?
2. Why does it make sense to believe that the more we *see* Jesus and *see of* Him, the more we will be like Him?
3. How might you be able to tell when doubt is becoming a barrier to courage in your walk with and work for the Lord?

*Next steps – Conversation: Make a point today to imitate Jesus and Paul by initiating a conversation about the Lord. With whom will you do that? How might you begin?*

## 5 Fear of the Unknown

*For we were saved in this hope, but hope that is seen is not hope; for why does one still hope for what he sees? But if we hope for what we do not see, we eagerly wait for it with perseverance.* Romans 8.24, 25

*For we walk by faith, not by sight.* 2 Corinthians 5.7

### *Faith and life*

The Christian life is a life of faith; we believe in Jesus, His work on the cross, His resurrection, ascension, session and rule at the Father's right hand, and His imminent return. We believe these things, not because we can see them, but because they have been revealed to us by God, through the inward work of His Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 2.7-10). So strong and sure is that belief – the gift of God – that, while we do not now see Jesus, we love Him supremely, and we “rejoice with joy inexpressible and full of glory” (1 Pet 1.6-8).

We see Jesus with the eye of faith – what Paul refers to as the eyes of the heart (Eph. 1.15-23). We see Him enthroned in glory. We see Him upholding the cosmos and everything in it. We see Him speaking life and coherence to the creation, dispatching angels to do His bidding, putting His enemies under His feet, gathering lost sheep, building His Church, and advancing His Kingdom on earth as it is in heaven.

We see none of this with our physical eyes. We *can* see the outward evidence of faith at work, however. We can see ourselves increasing in knowledge of, love for, and service for the Lord Jesus. We know this to be the work of God's Spirit within our soul. We can see the effects of that work, sometimes more vivid and consistent, at other times, here a little and there a little. We can see the fruit of our faith in Jesus, but we cannot see Jesus, except by faith and hope, as Paul and Peter explain.

This is what the writer of Hebrews intended us to understand when he wrote that “faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen” (Heb. 11.1, my translation). The Christian life begins in faith, grows in faith, acts in faith, bears fruit in faith, and increases in faith as we set our minds on Christ and bend our hearts to love Him above all else.

Seeking Jesus and the things that are above – through the Word and works of God – increases faith; and increasing in faith ought to be the constant prayer of every believer. For as faith increases, the vision of Jesus grows, our soul is revived and transformed, and we increase in the likeness of Christ. The Encourager within us, Who accomplishes this great work (Phil. 2.13), gives us courage to step beyond things familiar, easy, known, and safe into those works of ministry that lead to helping others grow in grace, bringing lost people to salvation, building the Church in unity and maturity, and furthering the rule of righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit on earth as it is in heaven.

As long as we live by faith – fully assured of what we earnestly hope for, and cultivating the evidence of that hope in good works of love – we will have the courage we need for whatever Jesus calls us to do.

It's when we fail to trust His promises, take our eyes off Him, and look to the conditions around us for assurance and safety that our courage fails and we begin to sink into the things we fear. And basically, what we fear is that which is unknown, that which may or may not happen if we step out of the boat onto the waves of life in this secular age.

### *Five paralyzing fears*

One of the consistent messages of Scripture to the people of God is “Don't be afraid.” Peter feared the boisterous waves around him; he took his eyes off Jesus, doubting the Lord could fulfill what He had called

## *Barriers to Encouragement*

him to undertake, and thus Peter began to be overwhelmed by the thing he feared.

Five fears can cause us to take our eyes off Jesus and to become *discouraged* in our walk with and work for Him. We can summarize these briefly.

The first is the *fear of loss*. Like the rich young ruler, we fear that following Jesus boldly into our daily calling to His Kingdom and glory will mean the loss of something precious. Whether that is time, wealth, comfort, or any other created thing, if we fear to lose such things, we erect a barrier to the Encourager's work of giving us courage to follow wherever Jesus leads.

Next is the *fear of failure* – the fear that if we undertake something in courage and faith, we may not be able to see it through, and thus we will sink into our fears. We lose sight of the fact that God, Who has called us to His Kingdom and glory, is faithful, and He will do in and through us whatever He calls us to do (1 Thess. 5.24). He will do in us what He intends, but we must go forward to Him in courage and faith.

*Fear of opposition* can also paralyze some believers. If they share the Gospel, someone may challenge them, and they may not know how to respond. If they volunteer for some work at the church, they may be opposed by those already engaged in the work. Their gesture of kindness, word or encouragement, or offer of a helping hand may be rebuffed.

The prospect of opposition to our steps of courageous faith may bring with it the *fear of harm* or the *fear of rejection*. Either of these can deflate our courage and cause us to slink back into our comfort zone.

These fears are real, because each of the things we fear are possible, and we know this. But faith can keep us from sinking into our fears if we keep looking to Jesus, clinging to His promises and Presence, and believe that He will bring us through whatever fears may be seeking to divert us so that we can know more of the power and joy which are ours through faith in Him.

### *Overcome your fears*

When Jim Kennedy first began doing the work of evangelism, he was faced by fear – all the fears we mentioned above. But he *knew* God had called him to this work, and he *believed* that, whatever may happen, God would not let go of Him nor allow him to sink under his fears. Jim would say to himself, each time he began a conversation about the Gospel, “Do the thing you fear.” Thus, embracing the words often spoken by our Lord to His followers, and looking to Jesus for courage, Jim would proceed on into the conversation, following the Spirit's lead at every moment.

Jim's ability to overcome the fear of being a witness for Christ transferred to millions of believers in more than 100 countries, who learned from his experience how they, too, could overcome their fears and fulfill their calling from the Lord.

Paul says that the way to overcome evil in our lives is to do good (Rom. 12.21). Fear that becomes a barrier to courage is definitely evil, because it keeps us from realizing the transforming power of God's Spirit, reaching out with the grace and truth of the Lord, and increasing in the likeness of Jesus and the joy and pleasure of His salvation.

The way to overcome the fear of evil is by recognizing your fear, resisting its power, renewing your vision of the Lord, and going forward in faith and obedience. As you do, the Spirit will give you the courage and power to follow in whatever the Lord is leading you to do, one step at a time.

### *For reflection*

1. Which of the fears mentioned here have you experienced in your walk with and work for the Lord? How have you overcome these fears?

*Barriers to Encouragement*

2. It's not wrong or sinful to fear. What is wrong and sinful?

3. How can believers help each other overcome their fears and know more of the courage and power of the Lord?

*Next steps – Conversation: Ask the Lord to allow you to initiate a conversation about the Gospel today, and to give you the courage to overcome whatever fear might keep you from doing so.*

## 6 Lack of Experience

*And he took him by the right hand and lifted him up, and immediately his feet and ankle bones received strength. So he, leaping up, stood and walked and entered the temple with them—walking, leaping, and praising God. Acts 3.7, 8*

*The seven last words of the Church*

You have no doubt heard the “seven last words of the Church”: “We never did it that way before.” Churches get stuck in no-growth ruts sometimes because they stick to familiar ways of doing things rather than carefully reviewing their work each year to make sure they’re on track with Scripture in all things.

I recall once teaching a seminar on the work of shepherding, using the six disciplines of the Good Shepherd Jesus outlined in John 10 as the framework of my talk. It was clear during my time of teaching that the men present – leaders and elders in their church – had no experience with what Jesus described. They were just serving on committees, running programs, and functioning as a board. They had no real hands-on experience caring for the Lord’s sheep.

At a break in the seminar, one of the elders approached me and said, “T. M., this is really good stuff you’re teaching us. I can see how it reflects the work Jesus did. But you know, we live in the *real* world...”

I interrupted him right there, saying, “No, my friend, we do not live in the *real* world. The real world is the world God is calling us to create by doing the work He has given us to do, in the way He has determined it should be done, by the power and courage of His Holy Spirit. Shepherding,” I explained, “is the real world. Running programs and serving on boards is not.”

This same problem – lack of experience, and the accompanying inability to see how we might begin to do God’s work God’s way – also affects us individually. I was teaching a course for pastors which included a segment on personal evangelism. On the first day of the course, I gave an overview of the week, and mentioned that on Wednesday we would be going out to the street corner downtown to do some evangelism, using a questionnaire.

At the noon break, a pastor approached me saying he was not going to be able to continue. I was concerned there might be a problem back home. “No, no,” he said, “I’ve just never done this before.” “Done what?” I asked. “That evangelism thing,” he explained. “Oh,” I said, “don’t worry. None of the guys in this course have ever done it this way before, either. We’ll practice together in the morning before...”

He interrupted me: “No, that’s not what I mean. I’ve been a pastor for fourteen years,” he said, “and I have never shared the Gospel personally with anyone.” Inexperience was shutting the door to courage in his soul.

“Well, my friend,” I said, “on Wednesday, that’s going to change.” And it did. I took him out with me and instructed him to watch and pray as I stopped people and asked permission to take a questionnaire with them. Then I said, “You’re on.” He stood statue-like as a few people walked past him. I prayed for him to have courage, and about that time, he stepped in front of a young man and said, “Hi, my name is (he gave his name), and we’re out here taking a questionnaire about the Bible. Would you be willing to answer a few questions?” “Sure, why not?” said the young man. The pastor took him through the questionnaire, only to discover he was already a believer. Then, before I could say anything, he stopped two more people. Then more.

He wasn’t exactly leaping and praising God; but a helping hand seems to have helped break him free from his lack of experience.

Two years after this, I was working in my study one day when the phone rang, and it was this pastor. “I have a problem,” he said: “I’ve shared the questionnaire with every person in our village. What do I do now?”

Nice problem, huh?

*All things new*

It's important for us as believers to remember two things: In Jesus Christ, we are *new creations*; old things have passed away, and all things have become new (2 Cor. 5.17). We have new attitudes to develop, new desires to nurture, new visions to pursue, new tasks to undertake, and new experiences to enter. If we're not constantly pressing against the boundaries of old things, to break through to the promised new things of Jesus, then we need to consider carefully whether we have in fact become that “new creation” Paul talked about (cf. 2 Cor. 13.5).

Second, we can find in Jesus the courage to take on new things as we grow in Him, learn His ways, and walk by His Word and Spirit day by day. He will make new things more our daily fare – new conversations, new insights, new plans and undertakings (Rev. 21.5). He is at work within us to will and do according to *His* good pleasure, not our convenience or experience (Phil. 2.13). And His good pleasure is to bring us to new things – new heights of vision, new forms of growth, new relationships, new skills, and new works of ministry.

We must not hide behind the “I’ve never done this before” excuse, lest we miss the excitement, the thrill, and the joy of following Jesus out on the waves of this boisterous world, as He makes all things new in and through us.

*Find a friend*

Sometimes the best way to get going in the new things of the Lord is to connect with a friend who has “been there, done that” and can lead you out onto the waves in the courage of the Lord. God is often pleased to use people in our lives to encourage us to stretch out into the newness of Jesus. Susie has done that for me more times than I could count. God has brought others into my life to encourage me into new areas of growth and new arenas of ministry – places I had not experienced before, but which became exciting challenges of newness in the Lord.

Find friends who will stretch you, take you with them, walk with you through some dark valley into the bright light of a new phase in your life, teach you new things, and encourage you to venture into new areas of life and faith with Jesus. Then become that kind of friend with others. Let the Lord encourage you through believers who are growing in the knowledge, love, and service of our Lord Jesus; and then make sure that whatever you learn, whatever new experiences you encounter, you share them with others, to encourage them as well.

We don't have to be stuck in a no-growth zone as believers. Think: All things new! Pray for new opportunities and challenges. Seek to learn new things. Explore new ways of serving others, starting conversations, and building others up in love. You can walk on waves of newness with Jesus, if only you will allow Him to encourage you in the way only He can.

*For reflection*

1. Why should we never use inexperience as an excuse for not doing something new in the Lord?
2. How have you experienced Jesus making all things new in your life? In which areas of your life would you like to see more newness?
3. Whom can you encourage to some new aspect of life in Jesus today? Who will encourage you?

*Barriers to Encouragement*

*Next steps – Transformation: Think of one area of your walk with and work for the Lord where you would like to experience something new today. What's the first step? Take it as soon as possible.*

## 7 Unconnected

*Then the seventy returned with joy, saying, "Lord, even the demons are subject to us in Your name." And He said to them, "I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven. Behold, I give you the authority to trample on serpents and scorpions, and over all the power of the enemy, and nothing shall by any means hurt you. Nevertheless do not rejoice in this, that the spirits are subject to you, but rather rejoice because your names are written in heaven." Luke 10.17-20*

### *Evidence of encouragement*

How can we know when we have been encouraged? Or when we have encouraged someone else?

We said that courage is that disposition of the soul – heart, mind, and conscience – that leads us to go beyond where we have ever been with the Lord before – exceedingly and abundantly beyond, both in our walk with the Lord and our work for Him. Encouragement is the work of God's Spirit. He is the Encourager Who dwells in all who believe to make them willing and able to do what pleases God (Phil. 2.13). Frequently, the Spirit will use one of the followers of Christ to take part in His work of encouragement.

The work of encouragement – acknowledging others, attending to them and their concerns, affirming and advising them, and assisting them to take the next steps in the Lord – brings the Holy Spirit in us to connect with the Holy Spirit in others so that a bolt of encouragement occurs, giving others the courage they need to overcome whatever has been holding them back to begin making more progress in the Lord.

That courage can be for any number of actions – seek forgiveness, heal a broken relationship, take up a new work, bear witness to a co-worker or friend, overcome some besetting sin, begin a new practice of spiritual disciplines, and much more. Courage begins its work, like Peter, stepping onto the waves, in next steps of action toward a fuller realization of the Kingdom and glory of God. Courage grows as we act on it; it multiplies itself within us, by the work of the Holy Spirit, so our initial encouragement becomes ongoing courage to will and do according to the good pleasure of God.

When we're on the giving end of encouragement, we need to do what we can to help the person we're seeking to encourage take the steps God calls him to take. If we're the ones being encouraged, then the same is true. Courage is confirmed and, in a sense, unleashed, as we take the next steps of obedience according to the leading of God.

We can be helped in doing *But now indeed there are many members, yet one body. And the eye cannot say to the hand, "I have no need of you"; nor again the head to the feet, "I have no need of you." No, much rather, those members of the body which seem to be weaker are necessary.* 1 Corinthians 12.20-22

### *The courage of our convictions?*

When Paul arrived in Ephesus for his first visit, he asked the "disciples" he found there, "Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?" When they responded that they hadn't so much heard as there *was* a Holy Spirit, he asked, "Into what then were you baptized?" They replied, "Into John's baptism." Paul then explained that, while that was a good start, it wasn't the whole of the Good News. Then he told them about Jesus, and they immediately believed and were baptized into His Name (Acts 19.1-5).

Notice that Paul did not question the sincerity of their faith. Indeed, he affirmed their beliefs, as far as they had gone. But he did not leave them with John's baptism, which was unto repentance from known sin and good works in line with that repentance. It was good they had come that far. But to bring the work of John to completion in their lives, they had to believe in Jesus, be baptized in His Name, and thus receive the Holy Spirit.

Being baptized *unto* repentance and good works is one thing. Being baptized *into the Name of Jesus Christ* is quite another matter. Jesus has destroyed the power of sin and death. He is ruling at the right hand of the Father to advance His Kingdom on earth as it is in heaven. He shows Himself to all who believe, that they might see His glory and be transformed into His image. And that transformation empowers them to bring glory and honor and praise to God in everything they do, and makes them determined witnesses for Christ.

When we who believe in Jesus Christ begin living up to our convictions – about Jesus, His Kingdom, the power of God’s Spirit, our calling as witnesses, and our determination to live for God’s glory – three things happen. First, we realize that we have discovered true and abundant life, life filled with joy, fruitful for righteousness, gushing with gratitude to the Father, and overflowing in words and deeds to bring refreshment and renewal to others. Second, some people who are impacted by our witness will be drawn to Jesus. The hope that is within us excites and interests them, so that some will join us in the Body of Christ (1 Pet. 3.15). Then third, there will be those who do not embrace our convictions, who become upset and irritated at the suggestion they need to repent of anything, and who will do their best to put us off, put us down, or put us away.

That’s precisely what happened in Ephesus (Acts 19.8-10), and it’s what Christians in every generation have experienced. And this means that being a Christian always requires courage. We are companions in the Kingdom and tribulation that goes with it (Rev. 1.9). There will be mockers, scoffers, threats, and even persecution. We know this. Thus, if we intend to live up to our convictions, we’re going to need courage.

Happily, the Holy Spirit within us is always working to give us courage. Very often, He will do that, as he did with Paul in Ephesus, through His work in fellow believers and members of the Body of Christ.

#### *Encouragers all*

Ask believers today, “What did you believe when you trusted in Jesus?” and you’re likely to hear something like, “In His death and resurrection for the forgiveness of my sins, and that He is preparing a place for me in heaven and will come again to take me to Himself forever.” For many believers today, this is the Gospel. This is salvation. Forgiven, saved, born-again, going to heaven when I die, even so come, Lord Jesus.

This is the Gospel of salvation, and it’s a true and good start in living out our convictions.

But the Gospel of salvation – the Gospel that goes this far and no further – is not the Gospel Jesus preached. It’s not the Gospel Paul preached. Jesus and Paul preached the Gospel of the Kingdom of God, where righteousness, peace, and joy in the power of the Holy Spirit are wrought in us and through us, taking every thought captive for obedience to Jesus Christ, and making all the nations disciples (Rom. 14.17, 18; 2 Cor. 10.3-5; Matt. 28.18-20). That Good News *is* our salvation, and we should expect it to grow and expand into every area of life, all our relationships, roles, and responsibilities, where Jesus is making all things new by making us all-new disciples in every aspect of our lives (2 Cor. 5.17).

And as was made clear to Daniel, the people who receive *this* Gospel can expect to know opposition and oppression from the unbelieving world. That’s because everything they are and do challenges the presumed autonomy of those who, though they know God at some level, refuse to give thanks and serve Him, turning to idols of their own making instead (Rom. 1.18-21). Those who have turned away from God will turn on us in one way or another. We’ll need courage to stand firm in the face of their hostility. Yet we know the Kingdom we have received will ultimately prevail through all the earth (Dan. 7.18-27).

In these days of increasing indifference to and hostility toward all things Christian, it’s going to take real courage to live our convictions about Jesus as Savior, Lord, King, and He Who makes all things new.

And that means we need one another in the Church. Being unconnected to the Body of Christ can be a major

### *Barriers to Encouragement*

barrier to courage. Each of us needs courage, and each of us can be used by the Spirit of God to encourage our fellow believers to hold fast to their convictions and stand firm for Jesus in every aspect of their lives. But only to the extent we work hard to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace (Eph. 4.3; Jn. 17.21), and work together in our churches for the increase and maturing of our congregation into Christ (Eph. 4.11-16).

#### *Give to receive*

In this study of encouragement we have learned two very important lessons. First, encouragement is a work of the Spirit of God, the Encourager. He dwells within all who believe in Jesus, as Paul explained to the Ephesian “believers.” He’s there to make us new people and to give us the courage and power to live as witnesses for Jesus by our words and deeds. He is at work within us, exceedingly abundantly beyond all we could ever ask or think, to make us willing and able to do that which is the good pleasure of God (Eph. 3.20; Phil. 2.13).

Second, we have learned that the Spirit often uses other believers, in whom He lives and is working, to strike a lightning bolt of encouragement in our soul, thus completing His work of giving us the courage we need to live for the glory of God in every aspect of our lives. We need one another. We need to be connected to other believers, and not just to enjoy our friendship in Christ. We need to sharpen and encourage and edify and pray for and support and lead one another into the fuller life and ministry of the Kingdom of God.

The Spirit encourages us by bringing other believers into our lives. We need to seek them out and together with them, seek Jesus and His Kingdom, listening for and anticipating the Spirit’s work of encouragement in and through each of us. If we will work hard to give encouragement to our fellow believers, we will find that the Spirit of God will encourage us through them as well.

And when we are, as members of Christ’s Body, filled with the courage of His Spirit, then we will experience more of Jesus making all things new in and through us, to the praise of His glory and grace.

#### *For reflection*

1. What’s the difference between the Gospel of salvation and the Gospel of the Kingdom?
2. Who are the believers God has put in your life for you to encourage? Do you pray for them regularly? Do you seek ways to encourage them?
3. What can keep us from connecting with our fellow believers for mutual encouragement?

*Next steps – Transformation: What will you do to be more consistent in encouraging your fellow believers?*

*Barriers to Encouragement*

*Questions for reflection or discussion*

1. Do you recognize any of these barriers to encouragement in your own life?
2. How can we overcome these barriers and tap into the Spirit's power to encourage us?
3. How will you be able to know when you are living more courageously for the Lord?
4. What can you do to be more consistent in encouraging your fellow believers in their walk with and work for the Lord?
5. What's the most important lesson you've learned from this part of our study on encouragement?

*For prayer:*

## The Fellowship of Ailbe

The Fellowship of Ailbe is a spiritual fellowship in the Celtic Christian tradition. Our goal is to promote revival, renewal, and awakening, following the teaching of Scripture and the example and heritage of our forebears in the faith.

The Fellowship of Ailbe offers many opportunities for training, prayer, personal growth, and ministry. Visit our website at [www.ailbe.org](http://www.ailbe.org) to learn more.

We hope you found this study helpful. If so, please consider making a gift to The Fellowship. You can contribute to our ministry by using the contribute button at the website, or by sending your gift to The Fellowship of Ailbe, 360 Zephyr Road, Williston, VT 05495.

Thank you.