

Some Days We Soar



Words of Encouragement
for the Christian Life

R. Herbert

NEW EDITION
With New Material!

SOME DAYS WE SOAR

**Words of Encouragement
for the Christian Life**

By R. Herbert

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INTRODUCTION

When it comes to the Christian life – just as life in general – some days we soar, and some days we don't. To stretch the flight analogy a little further, some days it just seems hard to “get off the ground” or, perhaps worse, we start out “flying high” and end up in an ignominious crash landing. Those are the days we may appreciate encouragement if there is any around. Like a cool drink on a hot day, it doesn't make the problem go away, but it helps us deal with it. But some days, encouragement isn't easy to find.

This is a particularly important issue for the Christian because walking the walk of faith, despite its blessings and benefits, also brings additional challenges; and encouragement can sometimes be a vital part of spiritual life, rather than just a luxury. Even though encouragement doesn't get all the press some of the other biblical virtues (like faith, hope, and love) get, the Scriptures actually contain more direct commands to encourage one another than they do to be patient, or to care for others, or a host of other good things. In fact, the Bible has almost as many direct commands to “encourage one another” as it has direct commands to “love one another.” So the biblical message is clear: encouragement is of primary importance, and Christians are supposed to encourage each other as well as anyone else who needs encouragement.

Nevertheless, there are not a lot of books that directly address the practical issues of how to encourage others and how to be encouraged oneself – and that is the reason for the book you are reading now. *Some Days We Soar* is a collection of short essays – some of them originating as blog posts on our websites, others written specifically for this volume – aimed at providing not only reasons for the Christian to be encouraged and to encourage others, but also some thoughts and guidance on how to accomplish those goals.

The book is divided into three sections corresponding with the three areas in which we perhaps most frequently need encouragement and wish to encourage others: enduring trials and difficulties, personal growth, and serving others.

Part One: Encouragement in Enduring deals with what is probably the greatest need for Christian encouragement: accepting, coping with, enduring and overcoming – all with God’s help – the problems and trials that life seems to throw at us (Romans 15:4). Sometimes these may be catastrophic events that suddenly confront us; other times they may be much smaller repetitive problems that still wear us down if not handled effectively. There are no easy answers to all life’s problems, of course, but we know that “...suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope...” (Romans 5:3-4 ESV).

Part Two: Encouragement in Growing looks at some of the ways in which we can be encouraged as we go through the “growing pains” of Christian life. The new Christian quickly finds that spiritual growth is not automatic. In order to even begin the process of being conformed to the likeness of Christ (2 Corinthians 3:18), we have to strive for spiritual growth. This has nothing to do with laboriously seeking salvation through works, but simply our wanting to follow the biblical injunction to “grow in grace and knowledge” (2 Peter 3:18). As Christians we are privileged both to accept the righteousness of Christ on our behalf (Philippians 3:9) and still to walk obediently to the best of our ability (Romans 6:15). That’s where we need encouragement to stay positive and to help others do the same in living out our lives with true peace and joy, while understanding that personal spiritual growth does not usually come quickly or easily.

Part Three: Encouragement in Serving is not about those times we are dealing with personal trials or spiritual growth, but when we are trying to serve and encourage others (1 Peter 4:10). In our interactions with others, we find a need for two kinds of encouragement – encouragement that we attempt to give to others and, if we are honest, encouragement that we sometimes need ourselves as we strive to serve but suffer occasional doubts about our capabilities, about whether what we are doing is making a difference, or other issues. Serving isn’t always easy, and encouragement is sometimes particularly needed in that area (Ephesians 6:7, etc.), just as much as we need it in dealing with trials or growth.

Ultimately, as Christians, the greatest encouragement we can have is one we should already be aware of – that in working with us, God is a God of encouragement (Psalm 10:17, Romans 15:5, 2 Thessalonians 2:16-17, etc.). He encourages us, if we allow him, just as much as he urges us to encourage others. But encouragement may come to you in many different ways. We hope that this small book might be one of them.

PART ONE:

ENCOURAGEMENT IN ENDURING

*“For everything that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that through the endurance taught in the Scriptures and the encouragement they provide we might have hope”
(Romans 15:4).*

1. DAYS WE SOAR ... AND DAYS WE DON'T

“... those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint” (Isaiah 40:31).

Isaiah's wonderful lines regarding the renewing of our strength carry an even more encouraging message than we might immediately recognize. First, Isaiah compares our strengthening to the flight of eagles. Eagles have very large wings in relation to their body size – which doesn't make them better “flappers” for flying, it makes them able to soar on air currents that carry them long distances and to great heights. They are wonderfully designed for this kind of soaring flight and often spend only a couple of minutes out of any given hour actually flying on their own strength. In fact, without the air currents that lift and speed the eagle, the bird is actually not an impressive flyer. A great amount of energy is required to flap those massive wings and lift the large body, but it is as the eagle utilizes the power available to it from air currents that it soars and its strength is literally renewed and multiplied.

The analogy for those “who hope in the Lord” is obvious. We may be able to accomplish a certain amount on our own strength, but if we choose to accept the power of the “wind” (Acts 2:2), our strength is renewed and increased and we can rise to much greater heights. But Isaiah doesn't stop there. After comparing God's strengthening of us to the flight of the eagle, he speaks about the strengthening of those who run and those who walk. These are clearly descending levels of strength and apparent accomplishment. Soaring is better than running, running better than walking.

We all have days when we feel that we spiritually soar with God's help, others when we feel we are not that high, but we are moving along steadily – running along, as it were; and there are yet other days when we feel we are just plodding pilgrims slowly putting one foot in front of another. Some days pain, worry, fatigue or failure take their toll on us, and we just don't

seem as spiritually energized. But that was doubtless Isaiah's point in the descending order of soaring, running, and walking – God promises to strengthen us however our day is going.

In his book *If You Want to Walk on Water, You've Got to Get Out of the Boat*, John Ortberg makes the point that it is natural and not wrong that we have such widely different days. Jesus knew what it was to receive God's strength to do his work on soaring days – days of healings and other miracles. He also must have experienced slower days when he had to cope with doubting and unbelieving friends as well as dealing with the hostility of enemies. And finally, Christ knew what it was like to need the strength even to walk – as he carried the heavy stake on which he was to be crucified.

The truth is, if we seek God and stay close to him, we can often soar – but we can't always soar. Some days we soar and some days we just feel sore. As Ortberg perceptively noted, sometimes the important thing is that we just keep going despite our weakness. In the last analysis it may take more character to walk than it does to soar – and in those situations God may prize our walking even more than our running or soaring.

2. BEHIND LIFE'S BLACK PATCHES

If we let him, God speaks to us despite everything.

Matthew sat alone in his cell staring at the letter. Imprisoned in a country not friendly to Christianity, Matthew (not his real name) was kept in relative isolation, and the only contact he had with the outside world was in the form of occasional heavily censored letters he was allowed to receive from his family. If the letters had any words of encouragement – especially scripture quotations – they were completely covered over by the heavy black markers of the government prison censors.

In the long months Matthew had been imprisoned he had come to deeply resent those patches of blackness that cut him off from the love of his family. Until today. Now, Matthew looked at the patches of black obscuring much of the latest letter he had received and smiled. Matthew was a happier man.

The truth of the situation had dawned on Matthew like a personal revelation. He had come to see that the black marks and patches on his letters did not obscure his family's love for him – they highlighted it. He saw that every obscuring black mark was not a denial of the love felt for him, but proof of it. Sometimes he could guess that there was a scripture behind the black ink from quote marks not obscured at the beginning or end of the marking. If the censors blacked out words individually he could guess from a short word blacked out after the quote marks that it was probably the reference to a quoted verse in Psalms, which his family knew was his favorite book of the Bible. Very occasionally, if he held the letter up to what light he had, he could make out faint traces of what was written and have some idea of what was being said to him.

As time progressed, Matthew came to resent the black marks less and less. Sometimes he would take out a letter and just look at the marks, because he knew that behind them was the love of his family; and understanding what lay behind the black marks – even though he could not see through them – sustained Matthew until he was eventually released.

Sometimes, when we go through the trials of life, it's hard to see God's love for us. We may even come to resent the black marks and dark clouds of life: the illnesses, job losses, persecutions, or whatever seems to obscure God's love and concern for us. But if we learn to view them as we should, we can come to recognize what lies behind the black patches in our lives.

On occasion we may be able to make out the writing of loving correction in things that go wrong, and we should always be alert to this possibility (Hebrews 12:6). However, this is not always the case – often it may be that we are being given an opportunity to learn compassion for others or to grow in some other way. But we don't always understand the point of the things we are enduring until we begin to see that God's love lies behind them.

In fact, if we come to view the black patches of life as we should, we realize that once we have committed ourselves to God, we can know that his love is always behind the problems in our lives even if we do not see it clearly (1 Corinthians 13:12). We can remember that every dark patch of life, although it might seem to obscure that love, in reality is being used to teach, guide, and form us or to somehow help others. We come to realize that the black patches of life do not deny God's love for us; they actually affirm that it is there.

3. AN UNEXPECTED STORM

Sometimes it's not the storm we are expecting that hits us; but whatever the storm, we can learn from it.

It was the weekend the tropical hurricane was supposed to hit his Gulf Coast hometown and my friend's email said they were preparing for a big and dangerous storm. That storm never arrived, but a couple of days later his young son was hit by a car while riding his bicycle to school. With his son hospitalized in serious condition, another catastrophe – my friend's own personal storm – had arrived.

It seems that life is often like that. Sometimes the storm doesn't hit when it's expected, sometimes it's not the expected storm that hits. Sometimes it's not that which we fear that comes upon us, it's that which comes out of left field, seemingly out of nowhere. It's not the disease we fear because of family history, but a different one that we contract. It's not the illness we are checked for, but another one that shows up in the testing. Yet we learn things in storms we do not learn otherwise.

The book of Job is instructive in this area. Job's ultimate life storm was certainly unexpected and terrible, but "the Lord spoke to Job out of the storm" (Job 38:1, 40:6). The truth is, we learn through our storms, the things we suffer, as even Christ himself did (Hebrews 5:8). This doesn't mean that the destruction caused by storms is good or that suffering is ever trivial or easily discounted. But good can come out of the storm and faith is more often formed and deepened in times of stress, rather than under sunny skies.

It's hard to think about these things without remembering the story recorded in the Gospels of how a great storm came up while Jesus and his disciples were crossing the Sea of Galilee (Matthew 8:23-27). Despite the turbulence, Jesus was sleeping peacefully in the boat until he was wakened by his fearful disciples asking him to save them. "He replied, 'You of little faith, why are you so afraid?' Then he got up and rebuked the winds and the waves, and it was completely calm. The men were amazed and asked, 'What

kind of man is this? Even the winds and the waves obey him!” (vs. 26-27). The disciples learned something from this experience about the power of the Son of God and how God can control the outcome of storms in our lives.

Katrina, Hugo, Sandy, Harvey, Irma and other great storms brought suffering to many people, as future storms will also. Other types of storms in our personal lives are no different, but for the Christian, every life storm is an opportunity for God to work something within us that might not have been there otherwise. Believing good can be brought out of the storm does not mean the storm is good, but that the One who allows the storms of life to touch us and teach us has the power, when he is asked, to calm the storms around and within us.

4. THE UPS AND DOWNS OF LIFE

“For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven ...” (Ecclesiastes 3:1 ESV).

Unless you live on a balmy tropical island where the temperatures stay fairly constant and there are few indications of seasonal change, your life is full of rhythms that you don't think about much, but which are always there. Day and night, hot and cold, spring and fall, summer and winter, daily high temperatures and daily lows. We take such rhythms for granted and don't feel particularly stressed if we find ourselves in a period of darkness, cold, or whatever – we know that the warmth or the light will return in time.

Although we may understand and live with this aspect of physical life, as Christians we don't always apply that understanding spiritually – although it is equally true of our walk with God. In his classic work, *The Screwtape Letters*, C.S. Lewis noted that there are times when God seems particularly close to us and our spiritual lives seem to go easily: our faith seems strong, we want to do what is right – and temptations to do otherwise are relatively easy to overcome. Yet there are other times when God may appear to be more distant, our faith seems less secure, and overcoming temptation is somehow harder.

Our spiritual lives, just like our physical lives, are a series of ups and downs, of “highs” and “lows” as well. But that is not the bad news we often presume it to be. In writing about this fluctuation in our spiritual experience, Lewis stated: “Now it may surprise you to learn that [God] ... relies on the troughs even more than on the peaks; some of His special favourites have gone through longer and deeper troughs than anyone else.” Although Lewis used the terms “peaks” and “troughs” and we may perhaps say “highs” and “lows,” his point is clear – and is one that is worth thinking about.

Lewis effectively argued that it is during our “troughs” or low periods, much more than during our “peaks” or high periods, that we are growing into the sort of creatures God wants us to be: “He wants [us] to learn to

walk and must therefore take away His hand; and if only the will to walk is really there, He is pleased even with [our] stumbles.” This is an important understanding of our spiritual lows – that during those times our efforts may be especially appreciated by God. So Lewis also writes, “... the prayers offered in the state of dryness are those which please Him best.” When we demonstrate that we want to continue to walk with God even when we do not feel inspired or particularly blessed or helped, we also demonstrate the reality of our faith and commitment.

That is a truly encouraging perspective if we can grasp it and make it ours. Although the spiritual aspect of our lives has its ups and downs and times of drought as well as times of abundance, God can and does use our spiritual low periods to increase our personal growth and service, if we let him. In fact, some of the greatest advances in Christian missionary and aid work have occurred at extreme low points in the lives of those who have been instrumental in bringing them about. Sometimes we are just more receptive to the needs of others and to possibilities to serve that we do not tend to see when we are cheerful and buoyed up in good times.

Just like the daily or seasonal weather cycles with their “high” and “low” temperatures, we will always experience highs and lows in our spiritual lives. But realizing that lows do not last forever and that while we are in them they may provide opportunities to grow that spiritual highs do not give us can make a big difference in how we live and what we accomplish. Looked at this way, we can strive to endure problems and discouragements not only in order to survive and to make it to the end of the road to which we are called, but also to grow and to accomplish more than we could perhaps otherwise have done.

5. WORDS FOR A TIME OF PERSECUTION

“... persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed” (2 Corinthians 4:9).

The apostle Paul knew a few things about being persecuted for one’s faith. After turning from his role as persecutor of the Church, Paul was himself frequently attacked and assaulted for his beliefs and teaching. The harassment was not just verbal. The apostle tells us he was physically beaten numerous times and that “Five times I received from the Jews thirty-nine lashes” (2 Corinthians 11:24 NASB). He was even, on one occasion, stoned and then dragged away and left for dead (Acts 14:19).

It was not just the leaders of the early Church who underwent persecution, of course. In his epistles to the Thessalonians, Paul provides an example of a whole congregation that was experiencing persecution soon after the formation of the Christian faith: “... you became imitators of us and of the Lord, for you received the word in much affliction, with the joy of the Holy Spirit” (1 Thessalonians 1:6 ESV). “This is evidence of the righteous judgment of God, that you may be considered worthy of the kingdom of God, for which you are also suffering” (2 Thessalonians 1:5 ESV). We don’t know all the details of how the Thessalonian Christians were being treated by those around them, but both of Paul’s letters to them make it clear that they were facing serious discomfort and persecution.

But Paul doesn’t just commend these people as an example of those who are persecuted for their faith; he helps them realize where much of the spirit of persecution comes from, and he also offers them hope. Notice what he told them: “But the Lord is faithful, and he will strengthen you and protect you from the evil one” (2 Thessalonians 3:3). In saying this, Paul foreshadows God’s help to persecuted Christians through the ages – stressing the fact that God either strengthens or protects his people, depending on his will, and sometimes he does both. Paul found this frequently. Sometimes he was rescued from difficult situations (2 Timothy 3:11) and sometimes he was not (2 Timothy 2:9, 2 Timothy 4:6-8).

We have only to look around the world today to see that many – possibly the majority of – Christians are still living in some degree of danger or discomfort in terms of societal pressure and persecution, and God still protects his people or strengthens them to endure. But why do some suffer and some escape? The testimony of past history and current events both show that God works despite the persecution of his followers. In fact, it is in times and places of persecution that Christianity often grows the most – both numerically and spiritually. Not only do persecution and societal lack of approval help believers grow closer to God, they also often give them unique opportunities to be a better light to others.

So it is no coincidence that Paul told the Thessalonians that they were models to all the believers in the surrounding areas (1 Thessalonians 1:3, 7-8). The persecuted Thessalonians were, he tells us, especially effective in spreading the gospel throughout their region (vs. 8) through their “work produced by faith,” their “labor prompted by love,” and their “endurance inspired by hope ...” (vs.3). Notice a detail regarding what Paul says here. “Work” and “labor” may sound like the same thing, but in the Greek of the New Testament, “labor” (Greek *kopos*) often denotes work done under difficult circumstances (compare the ideas behind the English expressions “at work” and “in labor”). So Paul speaks of the work, the labor, and the endurance of the Thessalonians – perhaps referring to differing degrees of hardship that they were experiencing.

But as a result of their work, labor, and endurance under difficult circumstances, the Thessalonian Christians were models of faith, hope, and love – the greatest qualities possible according to Paul (1 Corinthians 13:13) – and as such they were a powerful witness both to other believers and to those outside the faith.

Paul reminds us all that, paradoxical as it may seem, the more uncomfortable it becomes to be a Christian and the more difficult it is to do God’s work, the more committed Christians often become. And the Thessalonian Christians he speaks of were wonderful examples of the fact that the more committed we become, the more we accomplish in the calling we are given.

6. HE'S ALREADY THERE

“Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me” (Psalm 23:4).

From the seasoned soldier on patrol in an active war zone to the most timid individual, we all face dark valleys in some parts of our lives – even if they are only in our memories. King David’s words in Psalm 23 have been a help to those going into dark valleys for thousands of years, but we can sometimes miss their point.

If you have ever seen devotionals or other religious writings urging us to “take God with you into the valley,” you will perhaps know what I mean. Well intentioned as this approach is, it can have the unintended consequence of reducing God in our minds to a kind of spiritual good luck charm – a token we feel we must have with us for the sake of survival. But the truth is, of course, we don’t need to take God into the dark valley – the One who is everywhere is already there. We see this in other words of David:

Where can I go from your Spirit? Where can I flee from your presence? If I go up to the heavens, you are there; if I make my bed in the depths, you are there. If I rise on the wings of the dawn, if I settle on the far side of the sea, even there your hand will guide me, your right hand will hold me fast. If I say, ‘Surely the darkness will hide me and the light become night around me,’ even the darkness will not be dark to you; the night will shine like the day, for darkness is as light to you (Psalm 139:7-12).

These verses from Psalm 139 dovetail perfectly with those from Psalm 23. David is not saying “Where can I hide from your spirit?” He is asking, rhetorically, “Where can I possibly go where you are not already there?” In the same way, “Surely the darkness will hide me” does not mean “I can hide

from you in darkness,” but an honest admitting of anxiety in the form of “What if God does not see me in the dark valley?”

David knew the answers to these rhetorical questions. He had been in the dark valley – numerous times. He had cried out from the darkness around him enough times that he knew he would be heard. We can learn that same trust, too. We needn’t ever feel we are trying to contact a distant God – like someone radioing desperately for backup or calling for help from a signal-dead spot. God is there in the dark valley as much as anywhere. Notice David’s words again: “In my alarm I said, ‘I am cut off from your sight!’ Yet you heard my cry for mercy when I called to you for help” (Psalm 31:22). All we have to do to establish contact is to speak to him, and if we do, he will hear us, because he is already there.

So we need not think that we have to take God with us into the dark valleys of our lives. The good news is, he is waiting to hear from us there, waiting to be with us there just as much as he is anywhere. And, as David wrote, there is no valley dark enough to hide us from him, no valley dark enough to block him from helping us. We need not feel we must somehow take him into the valley – he is already there.

7. YOUR TRIALS AND GOD'S TESTS

Why does God allow us to go through various “tests” and “trials” in our lives? In order to answer that question, let’s look at another one: Why did God have Moses send spies into the land of Canaan? The immediately obvious answer is, of course, to check it out – to see what the situation was and get advance intelligence before the invasion. But was this the real reason? If we consider the matter, God certainly knew what the situation was in the land occupied by the Canaanites and could easily have conveyed that information to Moses, with whom the Bible tells us he spoke regularly. We see a number of instances where God gave Moses advance information on the kingdoms they were about to pass by, or pass through, on the way to the Promised Land. Yet it was God’s idea to send the spies (Numbers 13:1-3), although earlier he did not have Moses send out scouts to see if the way to the Red Sea was clear, to report on what the conditions were in the Red Sea or in the area between the Red Sea and the Promised Land. God simply told the people to go here or go there. So why did he command spies be sent into the Promised Land?

In his classic book *The Craft of Intelligence*, Allen W. Dulles, the legendary head of the CIA, actually examines this situation and points out that although the intent of sending the twelve spies was ostensibly to check out the land, the real purpose of this intelligence operation was likely not for the people of Israel to see what the conditions were, but for another, very different, reason. With the perspective of an intelligence director, Dulles points out that if it were just to gather information there would have been no need to send such a large (and noticeable) group as twelve men picked from the leaders of the tribes of Israel. There was also no real need to risk the leaders when younger fighting men could have been sent. Coupled with what we have already mentioned regarding God’s ability to simply tell Moses what the situation was in Canaan, the suggestion that Dulles makes regarding the spies seems very plausible.

In this view, the spies were not sent to provide information for the people, but as God’s way of seeing if Israel was ready to enter the land in

faith despite the problems they might perceive. That is why the men selected to be the twelve spies were the leaders of each tribe – men who not only represented all the people, but also would actually lead them in taking the land. When only two of the spies – Joshua and Caleb – demonstrated that they had faith to enter the land, God postponed the operation till that whole generation (apart from Joshua and Caleb) had died out. God then carried out the taking of the Promised Land with a new generation that was more willing to trust him and to follow his directives.

Dulles' reconstruction of this story makes very good sense. God did not need intelligence of the land of Canaan – he already had it. What God needed was “humint” or human intelligence regarding his own people, to test their readiness to follow his directions despite the apparent difficulties they might face. Genesis 22 tells us that God did exactly that with Abraham by testing him before delivering great promises to him, and God allowed Job to be tested before doubling his blessings (Job 42:10-17). In all these cases, the test came before the gift or the confirmation of things God was desirous to give (Genesis 22:17-18 and Numbers 14:23-24, 30).

There is an encouraging lesson here. We know that God does “test” his people: “... In this way I will test them and see whether they will follow my instructions” (Exodus 16:4); “The Lord your God is testing you to find out whether you love him with all your heart and with all your soul” (Deuteronomy 13:3); etc. Although we may sometimes think of God’s “testing” us as somehow checking on our dedication to him, we see in these examples that God’s tests often may be to determine if we are ready to receive his gifts. It’s a good lesson to remember next time we face a decision whether to do something we know is right, but difficult, and it’s a good lesson to remind us that difficult times may often be necessary preparation for God’s good gifts.

8. THE GOD WHO REJOICES

What is our perception of God? Can the God who constantly beholds the sin, sorrow and problems of humanity possibly be happy? Can the God who compassionately shares not only our problems, but also sees those of untold millions of people possibly be joyful?

Many of us unconsciously share to some extent the common perception of God that sees him as a brooding figure focusing on whether we are obeying his laws or not and the many problems humans create for themselves. It's hardly a joyful image and is reflected in countless pictures of Jesus as the suffering servant weighed down with the cares and sins of humanity. But at least three encouraging scriptures come to mind which show God in a very different light.

First, in 1 Timothy 1:11 and 6:15-16, in many translations, Paul speaks of "the blessed God;" but the word translated "blessed" is actually from a Greek word that means "happy" as much as it means "blessed" – so we could just as well speak of "the happy God."

The next scripture that comes to mind is in Luke: "... I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance" (Luke 15:7 ESV). "Joy in heaven" doesn't mean with the angels but not with God. Saying joy in heaven is like saying "dinner at the White House." We would expect the President to be participating in any White House dinner. So when we say joy in heaven, we have to remember it is God's house, it is his party, and we need to see this as a reflection of the personality of God. Joy in heaven is synonymous with the joy and happiness of God.

The final scripture that comes to mind is Matthew 25:14-30 – the parable of the "talents" or "pounds." This is an interesting parable at many levels, but think a little about one of its details. In the story, the master goes away, leaving talents (units of money) in the care of his servants. At his eventual return the servant given five talents shows how he has doubled them through his work. The master then says to that servant: "Well done, good and faithful servant! You have been faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of many things. Come and share your master's

happiness!” (vs. 21). Notice the master does not say “You have done well, so come and take on some of my heavy responsibility,” but rather, “Come and share your master’s happiness!” All translations have it that way. There is nothing that lets us get away from this simple meaning.

We could probably add dozens of scriptures from the Psalms and elsewhere showing that those who walk in God’s ways are happy and that must, of course, apply to God also. Despite his compassion and care for those who hurt now, God sees the big picture. He knows what he has planned and that ultimately all the hurt and sadness of physical existence will be wiped away (Isaiah 25:8, Revelation 21:4) and that it will have been worth the pain (Romans 8:18). So God is a joyful God who looks beyond the present pain – just as he tells us to do.

The lesson for us in these scriptures is clearly that if God can be joyful because he is able to look to the end result of his plan – with God’s help, so can we.

PART TWO:

ENCOURAGEMENT IN GROWING

“Then the church ... enjoyed a time of peace and was strengthened. Living in the fear of the Lord and encouraged by the Holy Spirit, it increased in numbers” (Acts 9:31).

9. DOES GOD EXPECT YOU TO BE PERFECT?

“Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect”
(Matthew 5:48).

One of the greatest misconceptions about God, even among many Christians, is that God expects us to be perfect – as he is – and is continually unhappy with us when we are not. Jesus’ words “Be perfect...” from the Sermon on the Mount are so well-known that it is sometimes hard to see past what they are commonly thought to say to what they really mean.

To get a proper perspective on what God does expect of us, we must first look at Jesus’ words in context. In Matthew, Jesus clearly tells us to be perfect as God is perfect, but if we read the same account in the Gospel of Luke his words are recorded as “Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful” (Luke 6:36). Why the difference? Both Gospels show in context that Jesus was talking about love (see Matthew 5:43-47 and Luke 6:27-35). Matthew’s Gospel stresses that our love should be perfect and Luke’s Gospel stresses that our love should be merciful – doubtless because Jesus talked about both aspects of love.

But when we look closely at the expression “Be perfect,” we see the situation even more clearly. The word translated “perfect” in Matthew is a form of the Greek word which means perfect in the sense of being “mature,” “adult,” or “complete.” Notice 1 Corinthians 14:20, for example, where the same word is translated as “adults”: “Brothers and sisters, stop thinking like children. In regard to evil be infants, but in your thinking be adults.” In Hebrews 5:14 we find the same word translated as “mature”: “... solid food is for the mature...”, etc.

In Matthew 5:48, then, Jesus is urging his followers to be mature and complete in their love – like God. Only a few verses before saying “be perfect” Jesus had said: “But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be children of your Father in heaven ...” (Matthew 5:44-45), once again showing that we should be like God in our love.

So Jesus' statement in the Sermon on the Mount does not mean that God expects us to be perfect in the sense of never making mistakes. In fact, the New Testament shows repeatedly that God knows we cannot be perfect in every way (1 John 1:8-10). That is why God accepts Christ's perfect life in place of ours, just as he accepts Christ's death on our behalf (Romans 5:10). But that does not mean that we need not strive in our own lives toward the goal of perfection (1 John 2:29, 3:7, etc.) – as long as we realize that our efforts will never gain our salvation. Our motivation for trying to be as perfect as possible must be our love of God and others.

This fact brings us full circle. When we realize that God knows we cannot be perfect in this life, but that he does encourage us to grow up in him – to become more like him as we live each day – we see God in better perspective. We see that the God of love has made a way for us to be perfect in his sight through Christ's life in our stead. But the God of love also offers to give us his love to enable us to continually grow to be more like him.

God does desire to see perfection in us, but he looks beyond us for that perfection. God does not expect continued perfection in our own daily lives – just continued progress. The statement that we must “be perfect” is not a command to do the impossible; it is an encouragement to become mature in fulfilling God's law of love (Romans 13:10, Galatians 5:14).

10. WEEDS AND SINS

“A weed is just a plant in the wrong place at the wrong time.”

Whoever wrote that didn't have a garden. After spending way too much of my day wrestling with crabgrass, dandelions and other assorted non-cultivars today, I almost titled these thoughts “Weeds Are Sins.” That may seem extreme, but after several hours of weeding I might be able to make a case for it.

At the very least, we can say weeds are connected to sin - as the book of Genesis clearly shows. When Adam failed his first job as a gardener and ate from the wrong plant in the Garden of Eden, he was told clearly: “Cursed is the ground because of you ... It will produce thorns and thistles for you” (Genesis 3:17-18).

Since then, weeds have been with us, and we humans have found little good to say about them. Do you remember, in the book of Job, what the final words of Job were when he ended his defense? He expressed his frustration and misery with the most discouraging words he could think of (and he thought of quite a few): “... let thorns grow instead of wheat, and foul weeds instead of barley” (Job 31:40 ESV). Then there is Jesus' parable of the weeds and wheat found in Matthew 13:24-30. It was a parable that he knew would make a point in a hand-powered farm-to-fork agrarian society.

But why do I think weeds are like sin? If your garden is anything like mine, you know weeding takes a lot of time. I sometimes put down weed killer (don't worry, I buy the eco-friendly kind), but the weeds still show up. They not only show up, but they seem to always find the hardest places to dig them out. And if I don't dig them out, they not only thrive, they multiply (ever wonder why weeds seem to produce so many more offspring than the plants you want?), and as they multiply they spread – even (and I must say this quietly) into my neighbor's yard.

The parallels with sin are all too obvious. Even with frequent use of God's sin/weed killer, the Bible, sins still show up – often in the most unexpected areas of life. And you know what happens if we don't dig them

out as soon as we become aware of them. Neither the “I’ll get the weeds next week” nor the “I’ll quit this sin soon” plans ever seem to work out very well.

What’s the answer? There doesn’t seem to be an easy one in either case. Pulling out weeds and tearing out sins are both exhausting work and seem to be never-ending jobs. But when I see how much better things are with the latest outgrowths of crabgrass, envy, dandelions, gossip, and other weeds and sins cut back, I realize it really is worth the ongoing effort.

And when we begin to get control of the weeds/sins in our lives we can concentrate on the job of growing the good plants – the faith and good works that God wants to see in our lives – as Isaiah says: “For as the soil makes the sprout come up and a garden causes seeds to grow, so the Sovereign Lord will make righteousness and praise spring up before all nations” (Isaiah 61:11).

After all, that’s what the gardens and people of God are supposed to be like: “... gardens beside a river, like aloes planted by the Lord, like cedars beside the waters” (Numbers 24:6) – and as you see, there is no mention of weeds.

11. THE GROWTH WE DON'T SEE

Have you ever had a friend thank you for something that you perhaps were not even aware you had done? Sometimes I think spiritual life can be like that, too. It's easy to be aware of our failures and the many areas in which we want to grow and to miss the fact that growth is taking place. God does work changes in those who desire and ask for transformation (Psalms 51:10, Ephesians 4:22-24), and perhaps if we walked with him more closely our growth would sometimes be more obvious. But that doesn't mean growth is not taking place because we do not always see it.

Think about the disciples for a minute. By the time of the last evening of Christ's earthly life, probably every one of the disciples had exhibited enough human faults, failures, fumbles and foibles to indicate to them all that perhaps they hadn't learned that much from their teacher. We might think of Peter's many mistakes, but others wanted to bring down fire from heaven (Luke 9:54), and it looks like they were all arguing on that last evening about who was the "greatest" among them (Luke 22:24). Additionally, Jesus probably knew that soon they would sleep as he agonized in Gethsemane, that soon they would all desert him, and that even the most dedicated among them would deny knowing him.

Yet despite their track record of failures and little apparent growth, Luke records Jesus as making an amazing statement regarding the disciples at that last Passover meal: "You are those who have stood by me in my trials" (Luke 22:28). It seems that Christ did not judge the disciples on their failures to date – or even those he knew were coming up soon – but on the right things they had done, on the areas where growth had taken place. He saw it in them even if perhaps they did not see it themselves.

The situation reminds us of the parable of the growing seed that Jesus had given earlier in his ministry:

This is what the kingdom of God is like. A man scatters seed on the ground. Night and day, whether he sleeps or gets up, the seed sprouts and grows, though he does not know how. All by itself the soil

produces grain—first the stalk, then the head, then the full kernel in the head. As soon as the grain is ripe, he puts the sickle to it, because the harvest has come (Mark 4: 26-29).

This is a “time-elapse” parable like the time-elapse videos that speed up time to show plants growing and other slow-changing things happening before our eyes. But the good news is that, just as the farmer in the parable does not see or comprehend it, the slow-growing plant is growing nonetheless; and that, Jesus said, is how the kingdom of God grows, also.

Once we come to understand this we can be encouraged that growth is growth no matter how small it may seem right now. And that helps us to focus on the value of every small – even seemingly insignificant – advance we make. Each right decision, each right choice, adds up, no matter how small it may be. As C.S. Lewis wisely wrote years ago in *Mere Christianity*:

Good and evil both increase at compound interest. That is why the little decisions you and I make every day are of such infinite importance. The smallest good act today is the capture of a strategic point from which, a few months later, you may be able to go on to victories you never dreamed of.

12. IN A HURRY TO BE PATIENT

Is patience a gene? I have always been impatient. Overcoming this failing is part of my personal climb. I have read the biblical verses relating to this subject many times and some have been helpful, but trying to be patient when you're feeling impatient is a bit like trying to be well when you are feeling ill. It's a nice try, but it usually doesn't go far, and I know I still have a long way to go.

Patience is a fruit of the Spirit of God, of course, but that doesn't mean that God makes us instantly patient if we ask for his help with it. As someone wryly observed, if you ask God for patience, don't expect a quick reply. But with the help we are given, we do have to develop patience. That's why something the apostle Paul says in his letter to the Ephesians can be particularly encouraging.

In Ephesians 4:1-2 Paul writes: "As a prisoner for the Lord, then, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received. Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love." We can compare these verses with what Paul says in Colossians, where we see the same pattern: "... clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. Bear with each other and forgive one another..." (Colossians 3:12-13). Here we have the same qualities we see in Ephesians 4 – humility, gentleness, patience, and love – grouped together with a few more – compassion, kindness, and forgiveness – added.

What is striking about these verses is that the qualities Paul is talking about are interrelated. They are not only all fruits of the Spirit of God (Galatians 5:22-23), but also they can be seen to interact in a number of ways, and this has a practical application that can be put into action. Instead of thinking about patience as an abstract goal, when we are feeling impatient with someone, if we work on one of the more concrete qualities in the group Paul brings together, it helps us to combat impatience at the same time.

For example, thinking about and working on being humble when we are feeling impatient really makes a difference. After all, when we remind

ourselves that we are not the center of the universe, what does it matter if someone is late to meet with us? When I think about what it means to be compassionate, I can better empathize with the overwhelmed driver in front of me who is holding up all the traffic, and so on. If we focus on the other qualities on Paul's list, we often don't even have to think about patience directly in order to better apply it.

Encouragingly, utilizing this small tactic of working on one quality to develop another is helping me to personally grow in this area. Perhaps not as quickly as I would like, but I have to be patient.

13. BEING ENCOURAGED BY OUR DISCOURAGEMENT

Ironic as it might seem, the further we progress along the Way to which we are called as Christians the more it seems we see the failings and errors of our own nature. That can be discouraging at times, but when it happens we need to remember something.

The Bible gives us two stories that speak to this situation, though we might not realize it unless we give the matter some thought. The first story, in the Old Testament, relates to a vision of the prophet Isaiah:

In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord, high and exalted, seated on a throne ... “Woe to me!” I cried. “I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the Lord Almighty” (Isaiah 6:1, 5).

Isaiah’s very clear reaction on seeing this vision of God was one of understanding his own spiritual inadequacy and “uncleanness.” Now compare this story with another in the New Testament – the story of how Jesus revealed his divine power to Peter and the men fishing with him:

One day as Jesus was standing by the Lake of Gennesaret... he said to Simon, “Put out into deep water, and let down the nets for a catch”.... When they had done so, they caught such a large number of fish that their nets began to break.... When Simon Peter saw this, he fell at Jesus’ knees and said, “Go away from me, Lord; I am a sinful man!” (Luke 5:1, 4, 6, 8).

Although these two stories may seem very different on the surface, Peter’s reaction to seeing even a small glimpse of Jesus’ divinity was not unlike the effect of the vision on Isaiah – it was a realization of his own unworthiness and sinful nature. Admittedly, these events occurred at the beginning of the careers of the two servants of God, but the principle remains the same –

the more we come to see of God, the more we see and understand our own failings. Many years after the conversion of the apostle Paul, he wrote “What a wretched man I am!” (Romans 7:24) and “... I am the least of the apostles and do not even deserve to be called an apostle...” (1 Corinthians 15:9). Yet Paul continued this same thought by saying: “But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace to me was not without effect” (vs. 10). And despite his painful awareness of his own failings, Paul could still say near the end of his life: “I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith” (2 Timothy 4:7). All these statements were true! Just like the rest of us, Paul doubtless realized his own spiritual failings all the more as the years progressed, yet he knew that God was changing him and completing his purpose in Paul’s life.

To use a simple analogy, before conversion we live in spiritual darkness – like living in a dark room – and cannot see any of the “stains” and “black marks” of sin that cover us. As we are converted and move toward the “light” (remember, God *is* spiritual Light), the more we begin to see those black marks on ourselves – and the brighter the light becomes, the more we see even the smallest stains. This is not the same as living our lives in a despondent spiritual attitude that focuses on how unworthy we are; it is just an honest realization of our own spiritual inadequacy and a heightened awareness of ways in which we do fail – sometimes in small things that we would never have noticed earlier in our Christian lives.

It is a truth of the Christian life that the more we grow and come to see God, the less we like what we see of our natural selves. Yet this can be encouraging – looked at the other way around, the less we like what we see of ourselves, the more we are probably seeing of God and the more we are probably moving closer to him!

As long as we are trying to walk in God’s ways, the more we see the failings of our own nature, the more we can be encouraged that we are doubtless moving closer to him – and that he is enabling us to increasingly see those things. We can be encouraged by this fact in the personal discouragement we may sometimes feel – and we can rejoice that coming to see ourselves more clearly means that he can continue the process of helping us to see him, and to become more like him.

14. BUILT TO LAST

We don't hear the expression "built to last" very often any more. It's used of old castles and some classic and vintage cars, but not much else. In fact, with modern "planned obsolescence" being as widespread as it is, we don't hear the term used very often at all.

Why is this? Being "built to last" requires both planning and hard work on the part of the builder. Neither of these things is popular in a world that increasingly promotes instant consumer gratification and fast producer profits wherever possible. The result, of course, is that most things aren't built to last any more, and that's an attitude that all too easily affects other areas of our lives.

The apostle Paul has something to say about how we build things in relation to our spiritual lives. Notice what he told the Corinthians:

... no one can lay any foundation other than the one already laid, which is Jesus Christ. If anyone builds on this foundation using gold, silver, costly stones, wood, hay or straw, their work will be shown for what it is, because the Day will bring it to light. It will be revealed with fire, and the fire will test the quality of each person's work. If what has been built survives, the builder will receive a reward. If it is burned up, the builder will suffer loss but yet will be saved—even though only as one escaping through the flames (1 Corinthians 3:11-15).

First, Paul presumes that we will be building on the foundation God has provided. When we look at the differences between the various building materials that Paul lists, however, we notice the diminishing value of the materials themselves: "gold, silver, stone, wood, hay, straw." These construction materials are also different in their permanence. In both cases they are listed in decreasing order. Paul makes the point in his analogy that value is tied to lastingness – value is limited when things we produce do not last.

In stressing this, Paul is looking at things from God's perspective – and clearly, God has a better perspective on time than we have. He knows that

nothing physical that is human-built is really lasting – the only thing we can build that will ultimately survive is his character in us and what we accomplish for him. It is our service to God and to others that cannot be destroyed through wear, rust, or the destructive elements. This is doubtless what Paul had in mind when he urges us to consider the works we are doing, whether what we are making is truly “built to last.”

This concept goes hand in hand with what we have been talking about in the last few chapters – the principle of slow but certain growth. As we said above, one of the big reasons people don’t build to last these days is that it takes time. So next time you feel you are only slowly seeing change occurring in your life, be encouraged to keep at it. Things of lasting value really do take time to build, but things built well are built to last.

15. A LITTLE LIGHT GOES A LONG WAY

Most of us are used to lights. Bright lights are all around most city dwellers to the extent that a candle or small lamp might seem insignificant, indeed. Even from space, city and village lights on earth are clearly visible, while at ground level in many areas it's hard to see the stars anymore because of the brightness of the ambient light.

As Christians we are all aware of Jesus' instruction to "let your light shine" (Matthew 5:16), but even though we realize our light is "reflected from Christ," it can still be a little daunting, especially for those new to the faith, to think of ourselves as "lights." We read the biblical stories of great men and women of God, we see some of the things accomplished through those luminaries of faith and others in our own age, and it seems clear that personally we are still at the one or two candlepower stage.

But if we do feel any lack of confidence in this regard, we should remember just what an effect even a single candle can have. For one thing, the light of an average wax candle can be seen at amazing distances – and I'm talking about miles, not yards. Because the earth's surface curves below the line of sight at 3.1 miles, or 5 kilometers, you can see a candle in clear dark conditions at 3.1 miles at ground level. But from an elevated position you can actually see a candle much further – on a dark night, in fact, the human eye is able to see a single candle flickering up to 30 miles (48 kilometers) away.

The only reason we are not aware of the amazing reach of a tiny light such as a candle is because of the bright lights that are often around us – the same reason city dwellers often can't see many stars, as we mentioned above. Brightness is relative to surroundings – if you are on a floodlit stage, your candle or mine may seem not very bright at all. But where most of us live our daily lives – away from the spiritual floodlights – even a small candle can make a huge difference in the surrounding darkness.

The point of this analogy is just that if we allow Christ to work in our lives and to "shine" in us, we need never be concerned that our light is not bright enough, that we are not knowledgeable enough, good enough,

spiritual enough. He supplies the light, not us, and even the smallest amount of light can be seen.

What Jesus said about the fact that a city on a hill can't be hidden (Matthew 5:14) also applies to our lowly candles. We don't have to shine like a city – we don't even have to be particularly bright to accomplish some good. Physics teaches us that a little light can go a long way. Especially when there is no other light around, a little light can make a huge difference. Even if we are only starting out on the Christian walk, the light we shine can make a difference.

16. WHY SETTLE FOR SECOND PLACE?

As the twelve tribes of ancient Israel neared the land they had been promised, two and a half tribes – Gad, Reuben and the half-tribe of Manasseh – looked at the land where they were on the eastern side of the Jordan River and compared it to the wilderness they had come through (Numbers 32).

Viewed from their standpoint just outside the Promised Land, the eastern side of the Jordan looked good. Perhaps it wasn't exactly flowing with milk and honey, but it certainly was better than the desert through which they had come. Moses tried to dissuade the two and a half tribes, but they insisted that it was what they wanted, so he allowed them to stay on the edge of the Promised Land, except for fulfilling their responsibility to help the other tribes in the Conquest.

So under Joshua's leadership, the men of the "Transjordan" tribes had to leave their wives and families and go with the other tribes to fight the inhabitants of Canaan (Joshua 1:12-16). When the dust settled, the men of the two and a half tribes were able to return to their homes, but they had seen firsthand the choice areas they could have inherited had they not chosen second best. Ironically, they still had to fight even though they had relinquished any part of the "first place" prize. But worse than that, the "second place" area they accepted was not as well protected and was on the border of several of Israel's enemies, the Ammonites, Edomites and Moabites. Their prize just wasn't as good as it could have been.

In what areas of our lives do we accept "second place" without pushing for the best prize? In school or college we accept less than what we could accomplish in assignments or grades if we decline to just push a little harder. As young adults we may accept second best if we marry the first person who comes along. As spouses and parents we take second in one of life's most important areas if we stop trying to develop our relationships with our mates and children. And as older people we take second best if we presume we are past doing anything much productive with our lives. We

can be unconsciously accepting second best in any area of our physical lives if we accept what is “OK” but not great.

Just as importantly, in our relationship with God, do we settle for second place in being content with where we feel we are in our development at any particular point, just keeping up a comfortable routine? Or do we keep looking for ways we can keep growing, helping, pushing to accomplish more of what really matters?

Every runner knows that, as a race progresses, if you stop pushing harder you start falling back. Perhaps that analogy is worth keeping in mind. In the ancient Olympics and other athletic games and contests, there were no “second place winners” – only the first place finisher for each event was considered a victor. The names of those achieving second and third place were not even recorded.

This is why the apostle Paul wrote: “Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one gets the prize? Run in such a way as to get the prize” (1 Corinthians 9:24). Paul’s meaning is clearly that we should run our Christian lives as though there were only a first place prize; we should live as though we will not settle for less.

Like the ancient two and a half tribes of Israel, we will still have to keep fighting if we do settle for less. So if we are going to have to run anyway for second place, why not run that bit harder, as Paul urges us, for first? And remember, in the Christian race we are really only competing against ourselves. So why settle for second place when everyone can win?

PART THREE:

ENCOURAGEMENT IN SERVING

“Therefore encourage one another and build each other up, just as in fact you are doing ... encourage the disheartened, help the weak, be patient with everyone” (1 Thessalonians 5:11, 14).

17. A GIFT MEANT TO BE SHARED

All of the original apostles (apart from Judas Iscariot, of course) seem to have experienced hardships and persecution during the establishment of the early Church. The apostle Paul was no exception, and 2 Corinthians 11:23-28 indicates he may have experienced more hardships than any other. Yet Paul not only remained optimistic, he was also a continual source of encouragement for others. In fact, although we need only read the book of Acts to see that many of the early Christians – Barnabas, Judas, Silas, and others – are noted for encouraging others, it is Paul who stands out as the “Apostle of Encouragement.”

Almost two-thirds of the New Testament’s use of the words encourage and encouragement are to be found in Paul’s letters. Paul wrote more than most of the other New Testament writers, of course, but his focus on encouragement is still proportionately greater than we find in the writings of the other apostles. So it is hardly surprising that we can learn a great deal from Paul’s epistles about being encouraged and encouraging others. We have mentioned several of the apostle’s comments on encouragement in this book, and there is at least one more that is especially relevant to the subject of encouragement in serving.

In his letter to the Philippians – one of Paul’s most encouraging epistles, although it was written while he was imprisoned and in great danger – he speaks specifically about what the result should be of our being encouraged:

Therefore if you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any common sharing in the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion, then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and of one mind. Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others (Philippians 2:1-4).

It is easy to miss the connection between our being encouraged and what should result from it in this relatively long passage, but the lesson is there. Paul tells us that if we “have any encouragement” in Christ – if we are encouraged by the relationship we have been given with the Son of God – then we should “value others above” ourselves and be focusing on the needs or “interests” of others – on serving them. What Paul is essentially saying is that just as in our Christian lives we are often blessed to be a blessing to others, so we are often encouraged to be an encouragement to others. Paul himself explains the principle of being blessed to be a blessing in his second letter to the Corinthian church:

And God is able to bless you abundantly, so that in all things at all times, having all that you need, you will abound in every good work ... You will be enriched in every way so that you can be generous on every occasion... (2 Corinthians 9:8,11).

And he also explains that this same principle applies to encouragement, that God encourages us to help us serve others:

May our Lord Jesus Christ himself and God our Father, who loved us and by his grace gave us eternal encouragement and good hope, encourage your hearts and strengthen you in every good deed and word (2 Thessalonians 2:16-17).

Clearly, for Paul – the New Testament writer we can most fittingly call the “Apostle of Encouragement” – encouragement is a gift we are given to share. This sharing of the encouragement we ourselves receive is not simply passing on encouragement (though it certainly includes that, of course), but also passing the gift on through our service to others – in having their interests at heart, and in “every good deed and word.” Not only are we encouraged *to* serve by numerous verses in God’s word, but also we are encouraged *in order to* serve!

18. ARE YOU A “SON OF ENCOURAGEMENT”?

Some people are upbeat and encouraging by nature. The book of Acts mentions Joseph, a Levite from Cyprus, to whom the apostles gave the name Barnabas - or “son of encouragement” (Acts 4:36). We aren’t given any other details, but if you know a man or woman like Barnabas, you know what a difference such an individual can make in our daily lives. Romans 12:8 shows that some people, like Barnabas, seem to have been given this ability: “[if your gift is] to encourage, then give encouragement;” but it is something we all can, and should, develop.

We see this in the example of the apostle Paul – someone who perhaps understood the value of encouragement more than any of God’s servants. As we saw in the last chapter, Paul had been through it all (2 Corinthians 11:24-26), and encouragement was a big part of the message that he preached. Acts 20:1-2 tells us, for example, that “... Paul sent for the disciples and, after encouraging them, said goodbye and set out for Macedonia. He traveled through that area, speaking many words of encouragement to the people ...” And when Paul could not be with the churches he pastored, he sent others with precisely this task: “I am sending him [Tychicus] to you for this very purpose, that you may know how we are, and that he may encourage you” (Ephesians 6:22).

That is the background to the commands to “encourage one another” found in Paul’s writings (2 Corinthians 13:11, 1 Thessalonians 5:11, etc.). But do we see these statements as actual commands or as just pleasant sentiments? It seems clear what the apostle intended them to be.

There is something we have to understand before we can help others in this way, however. Encouragement is like wealth – you can’t spread it if you don’t have it! We need to learn to be encouraged – to see the encouragement God offers us, not only in his written word, but also in everyday life – in order to be truly uplifting to those around us.

As might be expected, Paul provides an example here. Acts records that when he was on his way to Rome and facing a wholly uncertain future,

believers in the area travelled to meet Paul: "... At the sight of these people Paul thanked God and was encouraged" (Acts 28:15). And notice what Paul wrote to Philemon, "Your love has given me great joy and encouragement ..." (Philemon 1:7). Like Paul, we need to be actively looking at the good things in our lives – both when things are going well and when they are not. Even when things are going well, we still need to be open to the effects of encouragement. Acts 9:31 says, "Then the church throughout Judea, Galilee and Samaria enjoyed a time of peace and was strengthened. Living in the fear of the Lord and encouraged by the Holy Spirit, it increased in numbers." So encouragement is one of the many functions of the Spirit of God (1 Corinthians 12:4) and a vital part of personal and collective growth in such times.

In bad times, encouragement plays an even more obvious role. The book of Psalms is a great resource for seeing the encouraged mindset in action. You need only read a few of David's psalms to see both the anguish and the joy of his life. But David knew that things always worked out in the end. When he wrote, "You, Lord, hear the desire of the afflicted; you encourage them, and you listen to their cry" (Psalms 10:17), he was writing from a lot of experience. It was with real knowledge that he wrote "weeping may endure for a night, but joy comes in the morning" (Psalms 30:5 NKJV). But we have to be looking for the things that work out in our own lives, be conscious of them, and appreciate them, to be able to offer encouragement like that.

Remember, too, that these dual points of encouraging and being encouraged go hand in hand. When we encourage others, we are often encouraged ourselves. And if we focus on the things that encourage us in life, we are better able to help others do the same. Who better to summarize this situation than Paul himself: "By all this we are encouraged. In addition to our own encouragement, we were especially delighted to see how happy Titus was, because his spirit has been refreshed by all of you" (2 Corinthians 7:13). These servants of God knew that we all need to be encouraged and to encourage one another. So even if you are privileged to know someone encouraging like Barnabas in your church or circle of friends, remember that the position is still open – you, too, can be a "son" or "daughter" of encouragement.

19. LET YOUR SMILE SO SHINE

“When I smiled at them, they scarcely believed it; the light of my face was precious to them” (Job 29:24).

You probably know that studies have found that smiling is good for you. Carefully controlled psychological experiments have proven that we are happy because we smile just as much as we smile because we are happy. Smiling – even forced smiling – has been found to relieve stress, and a 2010 study published in *Psychological Science* even showed that smile intensity in photographs helped predict longevity.

But did you know that at least one study has found that the single most effective thing a person can usually do to enhance his or her relationships with other people is ... to smile more often? So in the title to this chapter I do not mean to be flippant in paraphrasing the biblical injunction “... let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven” (Matthew 5:16). Letting our “light” shine is clearly more than just smiling; it involves our “good works” – the whole range of our behavior and interactions with others. Yet if smiling is such an important component of our relationships with others, shouldn’t we indeed smile more often?

We may not be able to find biblical verses saying “Jesus smiled,” but in his classic work *The Humor of Christ*, Elton Trueblood lists thirty passages showing the humor of Jesus in the Synoptic Gospels. There are many other examples in the Bible of things being said with evident humor that suggest smiles were often present on the faces of God’s servants (for example, 1 Kings 18:27); and verses like “Our mouths were filled with laughter, our tongues with songs of joy” (Psalm 126:2) had to involve smiling.

The point is that walking in God’s ways should produce smiles at least a portion of the time. This is particularly true because feelings of care and affection are frequently accompanied by smiles. If we are concerned and caring for others, we will naturally smile even, sometimes, despite our own circumstances. In fact, just as experiments have found we can make ourselves happy by smiling, we can also make others happy by smiling at

them. So there are at least two good reasons to be smiling, but it is something many Christians don't do as often as we might expect. A surprising number of sincere believers live under a cloud of seriousness – at its worst it can be an expression of focusing on spiritual problems rather than the answers, though more often it's just that we forget what an impact a smile can have. But smiling encourages others, and that always makes it worth doing.

So keep this in mind when you greet the world. As they say, if you see someone without a smile, give them one of yours. It's not meant as pop-psychology advice to make you feel better; it's meant as a small reminder that smiling is a part of letting our light shine. It certainly isn't the most important part, but it may be the first thing that people notice about us and – as Job mentions in the scripture quoted above – it may be one of the things they see and remember best.

20. TALKING THE TALK

In Christianity as in so many other areas, the importance of “walking the walk” rather than just “talking the talk” is self-evident. But sometimes we need to remember the value of the talk, too. The book of Malachi contains a classic reminder of this: “Then those who feared the Lord talked with each other, and the Lord listened and heard. A scroll of remembrance was written in his presence concerning those who feared the Lord and honored his name” (Malachi 3:16).

Here, both walking and talking are shown as important. First we see it was those who “feared the Lord” who were getting God’s attention. Although it is possible to fear God and not obey him, that is obviously not the situation here. Proper fear of God, as the Bible clearly shows, does not involve cringing fear of punishment, but positive loving obedience – as was the case where the names of these people who honored God’s name were being written in a “scroll of remembrance” (and see Malachi 3:17-18). But beyond the obedience that was clearly involved here, we see that what had caught God’s attention was the fact that these people talked with each other. The context of this verse indicates that this was not just talk regarding some topic of physical interest, but talk regarding aspects of the walk with God in which these people were engaged.

In its broadest sense, the talking with fellow believers mentioned in Malachi means not only talk which relates to biblical issues and principles in the abstract, but also talk which is based on the love of our neighbor – taking an active interest in the members of our spiritual family, finding out about them, getting to know their needs and encouraging them. Now we should remember that in the Bible the word “encourage” can mean positive encouragement of those who are undergoing difficulties, encouraging others to continue to do the good they are doing, and helping others by guiding, admonishing, and even warning them if necessary (all these words occur as translations of the Hebrew or Greek words for “encourage” in different circumstances). But in any and all of its meanings, we can only encourage others if we know where they need encouragement – and that’s where talking comes in.

It's a question we can ask ourselves every time we converse with a brother or sister in the faith: how much am I getting to better know this person and their individual needs, the things they are working on, struggling with, or just hoping to achieve? We can follow that question up with another: how can I encourage this person in their struggles and aspirations? It may feel somewhat artificial at first as we begin to try to include these things and to make each conversation profitable for others, but it becomes second nature if we persist; and we can find ourselves talking at a whole different level.

That's the kind of talk which shows both love of God and of our neighbor, and if it is regularly a part of our conversation with those with whom we interact and fellowship, we can be confident that we are not just talking, but that we are "talking the talk."

21. WHAT THE CAVEMEN LEARNED

I'm not talking about prehistoric Neanderthal or Cro-Magnon "cavemen" here – I'm actually thinking of two men of God who at different times in biblical history both learned important lessons at the back of a cave.

These men were both successful in their own fields – one a warrior and one a man of religion. Both were accustomed to life around palaces and nice homes, but both men lost everything they had and fled in depression and fear for their lives – to the back of a cave.

The first man was King David. 1 Samuel 22 tells us that when the jealous Saul stepped up his campaign to kill the young shepherd-warrior, David finally fled to a mountain cave where he holed up in depression, frustration and fear. The other man was Elijah, and in 1 Kings 19 we see that when the wicked Jezebel threatened his life, Elijah also "caved" under the pressure and ran for many miles, to the back of a cave on Mount Horeb – where he stayed, apparently in fear, frustration, and anger.

There are times in our lives when psychologically we find ourselves in the back of a cave, too. We understand that some depression is physically caused and must be treated as such, but sometimes we find ourselves in the dark cave of depression or despair due to discouragement and difficulties. This is because fleeing to the inner parts of our minds is a very human reaction and sometimes seems like the only way to survive. Unfortunately, it becomes easy to stay there. It's not that we are comfortable in the cave of depression, but the longer we stay there the harder it becomes to leave. That's why in both biblical stories of God's servants who fled to physical caves, the first thing we see in the way God turned these situations around was that he commanded both men to leave the cave they were in.

In David's case, God sent a prophet to David to specifically tell him he had spent enough time in the cave and that it was time to leave. "... the prophet Gad said to David, 'Do not stay in the [cave] stronghold'" (1 Samuel 22:5), so, uncomfortable as it was to do, at God's command David left the cave. We see exactly the same with Elijah. "The Lord said, 'Go out and stand on the mountain in the presence of the Lord ...'" (1 Kings 19:11). God patiently listened to the reasons Elijah gave for his depression, anger and

fear, but he nevertheless firmly told him to come out of the cave. It probably wasn't psychologically easy for them, but both men obeyed in faith. They may not have seen a reason to leave the cave, yet once they realized it was God's will they obeyed.

So, God understands when we sometimes flee to the cave, but he is just as clear in telling us we must not stay there. And God goes a step further – as the wise Physician he is, he prescribes what we need in order to stay out of the cave. In both the stories of David and of Elijah, God prescribed exactly the same spiritual medicine. When he instructed David to leave the cave, we see the next thing he did was to tell David to go help the people of Keilah who were being attacked by the Philistines: “Go, attack the Philistines and save Keilah” (1 Samuel 23:1-2). And when Elijah obediently stepped out of his cave, God immediately told him to go to Damascus and instructed him: “... When you get there, anoint Hazael king over Aram. Also, anoint Jehu son of Nimshi king over Israel, and anoint Elisha son of Shaphat ...” (1 Kings 19:15-16).

God doesn't just tell us to pull ourselves together and leave the cave of depression. He tells us to leave – and to go help someone who needs help. Finding ourselves in a “cave” is something that even some of the greatest of God's servants have experienced, but the way out was the same for them as it is for us. We overcome this problem only when we realize that God doesn't want us to live in the cave and that his prescription for cave fever is often to go help someone. It's as though God knows that the only way for us to effectively stay out of the cave is not just to get busy, but to get busy serving others. That is how God helps us get our focus off our own problems – by getting us to focus on and help others whose problems are so often so much worse than our own.

22. WHEN ENCOURAGEMENT WORKS BEST

The book of Acts tells the story of how the apostle Paul, along with his co-worker Silas, while they were at Philippi on Paul's second missionary journey, encountered a female slave who made a great deal of money for her owners by predicting the future. When Paul cast out the spirit that enabled her to do this, the woman's owners were infuriated and raised an uproar against the missionaries which led to them being seriously beaten:

The crowd joined in the attack against Paul and Silas, and the magistrates ordered them to be stripped and beaten with rods. After they had been severely flogged, they were thrown into prison, and the jailer was commanded to guard them carefully. When he received these orders, he put them in the inner cell and fastened their feet in the stocks (Acts 16:22-24).

This was no simple "roughing up" at the hands of a few disgruntled individuals. Luke stresses that the crowds joined in the attack, so it sounds as though the two men may well have been badly beaten even before they were "severely" beaten with rods in a professional-level punishment. The pain of cumulative beatings like this would be intense and would have lasted for days. To add insult to the injury, Paul and Silas were then thrown into the "inner" cell – the lightless dungeon-like part of the prison where they were fastened in stocks so they could not even move.

These events took the concept of "no good deed goes unpunished" to new levels of irony. We can only imagine the levels of pain and discomfort Paul and Silas must have felt at this time. But Luke tells us that:

About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the other prisoners were listening to them. Suddenly there was such a violent earthquake that the foundations of the prison were

shaken. At once all the prison doors flew open, and everyone's chains came loose (Acts 16:25-26).

The jailer himself was converted, and if you have read the account in Acts you know the end of the story is much happier. After they were freed, Paul and Silas left the jail and went to the house of the convert Lydia. We might expect to read that while there the believers tended their wounds and encouraged the two men. Actually, this is not what happened. Luke plainly tells us the very opposite: "After Paul and Silas came out of the prison, they went to Lydia's house, where they met with the brothers and sisters and *encouraged them ...*" (Acts 16:40, emphasis added).

It was Paul and Silas who encouraged the believers! The lessons for us in this amazing twist to the story are clear. We may not rise to the level of encouragement that these two servants of God accomplished, but their actions teach us not only that any time is a good time for encouragement, but also that the most effective and meaningful time we can ever encourage others is when we ourselves are suffering.

Encouragement is a wonderful thing, but if we are not careful there is always a danger that when we ourselves are feeling buoyed by peace and happiness, our encouragement of others who are down or discouraged can seem slightly hollow – it's easy for us to say "be encouraged" when we are not the ones suffering. But when encouragement is given by those who are suffering themselves, it carries a level of truth and effectiveness that cannot be doubted. The story of Paul and Silas encouraging others is one we should try to remember. When we find ourselves in times of suffering, this story can remind us that we may have an unequalled opportunity not only to be encouraged ourselves, but also to encourage others.

23. HOW MANY TIMES?

“Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, ‘Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me? Up to seven times?’ Jesus answered, ‘I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times’”
(Matthew 18:21-22).

The words of Jesus concerning how many times we must forgive others – till “seventy-seven times” or, as many manuscripts have it, “seventy times seven” – are words every Christian knows and tries to keep in mind, but do we apply this principle in other, more positive areas? What about our responsibility to encourage others?

Consider the story of Joshua. We remember Joshua as the great military leader who oversaw the conquest of the Promised Land, yet Joshua does not seem to have started out as a fearless leader. We see that in instructing him, Moses told Joshua twice to “be strong and courageous” (Deuteronomy 31:6-8), and when God formally commissioned him, he told Joshua to “be strong and courageous” (Deuteronomy 31:23). Then, again, in the opening chapter of the book of Joshua God tells him three times to “be strong and courageous” (Joshua 1:6, 7, 9), and even the people of Israel encourage Joshua to “be strong and courageous” (Joshua 1:18).

So the man who became a great leader was encouraged on at least seven occasions to have the strength and courage he needed, then the statement doesn’t appear again. Eventually, in fact, once he grew in confidence, we find Joshua using exactly these same words to encourage the Israelites (Joshua 10:25)! Just as God, Moses and the people continued to encourage Joshua until he had gained experience and confidence, it is only as we persevere with encouragement and help that people come to where they don’t need it to the same degree.

When we look elsewhere in the Bible we see many other examples of this willingness to help others in an ongoing manner, to do good to them as many times as it might take. In the New Testament, the story of the Good Samaritan is an excellent example. The Samaritan did not just give some

first aid to the man in the ditch and go on his way – he worked through the problem step by step, with repeated actions:

He went to him and bandaged his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he put the man on his own donkey, brought him to an inn and took care of him. The next day he took out two denarii and gave them to the innkeeper. ‘Look after him,’ he said, ‘and when I return, I will reimburse you for any extra expense you may have’ (Luke 10:34-35).

In the same way, Paul tells us: “We who are strong ought to bear with the failings of the weak and not to please ourselves” (Romans 15:1). To “bear with” means in an ongoing way, and the plural “failings” (or weaknesses) does not just mean at one time, but through time – as long as there is a need. This is why Paul also tells us: “Let us not become weary in doing good ...” (Galatians 6:9), because the needs of others are often ongoing and at no time do we reach a point where we have “done enough” if a need still exists.

If we can embrace the concept of forgiving others “seventy-seven” times, perhaps we should remember to continue to help and encourage those who need it, keeping this same attitude in mind.

24. GREATER WORKS THAN THESE

“... whoever believes in me will do the works I have been doing, and they will do even greater things than these ...” (John 14:12).

The words of Jesus are clear, yet we may wonder how this can be. Jesus performed miraculous deeds seen by many, healed the lame and the blind, raised Lazarus from the dead – can we do greater things than these?

A key in understanding this verse in the Gospel of John is to realize the difference between the “signs,” “wonders,” and “miracles” as opposed to the “works” performed by Jesus. There is certainly some overlap in the use of these terms, but generally speaking, there is a difference. The Greek words translated “signs,” “wonders,” and “miracles” are all frequently used of the miraculous deeds Jesus performed as signs of his Messiahship. Jesus spoke of his followers doing such things, though usually in the context of faith – that if we have enough faith we, too, would be able to accomplish great things with God’s help.

But beyond these miraculous deeds, Jesus also performed many other works of teaching, guiding, and helping his disciples and the crowds that followed him. The word “works” (Greek *erga*) used in John 14:12 can include miraculous deeds, but it is more general and signifies other non-wondrous works as well. In fact, this word can include ongoing duties, works, and business, rather than just individual acts; and the word certainly covers Christ’s ongoing teaching, helping, and guidance.

So when we look at the broader and often more ongoing sense covered by “works,” we can see that Christ’s statement that his followers would do “greater things” than he had done most likely refers not to miracles, but to his work of preaching the gospel, teaching, helping, guiding, etc. Such deeds were not entirely dependent on faith to accomplish them, and faith is not mentioned in John 14:12, which speaks of believing in Jesus but does not specify having enough faith to accomplish such works. These general works of his followers, Jesus affirmed, would be “greater” than those he had done, and this can mean greater in extent rather than greater in type.

Jesus certainly taught large crowds, sometimes of thousands of people. But we have only to look at the eventual effects of the printing press and, in our own age, radio, television, and the internet, when used to spread the word of God and to explain its teachings to millions of people, to see that the extent of these works has indeed been greater than any individual could have accomplished in the time of Christ.

We should always remember that “no servant is greater than his master, nor is a messenger greater than the one who sent him” (John 13:16). The greater works that are done by Jesus’ followers are still done by him through us – but the potential for a greater extent of works of helping and teaching in our own age is a very real one.

When we look at the area of Christian service, could there be anything more encouraging than the opportunity every one of us has to have a part in fulfilling the potential of “greater works” for the kingdom of God in our own age? Whether through service or support, prayer or preaching, evangelism or encouragement, “greater works” are possible and waiting to be done.

AFTERWORD: THE COURAGE IN ENCOURAGEMENT

“... Jesus immediately said to them: ‘Take courage! ...’” (Matthew 14:27).

The word “encourage” means to “put courage in,” and the Bible contains many stories of personal courage that are, indeed, encouraging. Some, such as the account of the young David fighting the giant Goliath, come quickly to mind. But there are dozens more examples throughout the pages of Scripture where individuals stepped forward and fought against huge odds or difficult situations – often alone and without the support of others. There are lessons about encouragement that we should not miss in these stories. Here are three that we can take to heart:

Courage Is Commanded

“Take courage” is not just a biblical suggestion; it is a biblical command. We may be well aware of the many inspiring Old Testament verses such as “Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid or terrified ... for the Lord your God goes with you; he will never leave you nor forsake you” (Deuteronomy 31:6) and the multiple times God commanded his leaders such as Joshua to be courageous (Joshua 1:6, 7, 9, etc.), but we don’t always notice examples in the New Testament that apply directly to us.

If we look carefully, we find Jesus not only commanded courage of his disciples when they feared: “... Jesus immediately said to them: ‘Take courage!’” (Matthew 14:27; Mark 6:50), but we also find him reminding his servants to have courage relative to the work he gave them to do: “The following night the Lord stood near Paul and said, ‘Take courage! As you have testified about me in Jerusalem, so you must also testify in Rome’” (Acts 23:11).

The apostle Paul clearly obeyed that command (Philippians 1:19-27, etc.) and passed the instruction along to the Christians he taught: “Be on your guard; stand firm in the faith; be courageous; be strong” (1 Corinthians 16:13). There is no question that courage is commanded of the followers of Christ as much as it was of God’s servants in Old Testament times.

Courage Is Contagious

It helps us to understand the importance of courage when we realize that there is not a single instance among the dozens of accounts of physical and spiritual bravery found in the Bible where one person's courage did not have an emboldening effect on others.

Again, we may be more familiar with Old Testament examples such as Saul's son Jonathan demonstrating courage that inspired his armor bearer to join him in fighting against heavy odds (1 Samuel 14:1-14). Numerous examples in the Hebrew Scriptures show people being inspired by a courageous action, even if only after someone else was successful. Such was the case with the disheartened Israelites after David slew Goliath (1 Samuel 17:50-52).

But there are also fascinating examples of the contagious nature of courage in the New Testament. Take the case of Joseph of Arimathea who bravely asked Pilate for the body of Jesus in order to give him a proper burial. The Gospel of Mark tells us that "Joseph of Arimathea, a respected member of the council, who was also himself looking for the kingdom of God, took courage and went to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus" (Mark 15:43 ESV). This was no small act of bravery, as Jesus had just been executed as a rebel instigating sedition against the Roman Empire – and Joseph was no natural hero. John's Gospel tells us: "... Now Joseph was a disciple of Jesus, but secretly because he feared the Jewish leaders. With Pilate's permission, he came and took the body away" (John 19:38).

But Joseph's act of courage had immediate ripple effects. John's Gospel also tells us that "He was accompanied by Nicodemus, the man who earlier had visited Jesus at night. Nicodemus brought a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about seventy-five pounds [to embalm the body of Jesus]" (John 19:39). When Joseph "took courage," he inspired Nicodemus – who had been too afraid of the Jews to talk with Jesus except under the cover of darkness – to likewise act with courage.

Courage is not just for heroes. Biblical examples like these show courage always has an effect – even when others are afraid to act until they see the success of someone who does demonstrate courageous behavior.

Courage Is Confirming

Not only is courage contagious when it is demonstrated, but acting courageously – even if we do not feel courageous – confirms our faith to God, to others and even to ourselves. God commands us to live courageously so he is obviously well pleased when we do so.

Acts of courage can have an effect on others that we may not even guess at the time. The book of Acts tells us that the Jewish authorities questioned the apostles Peter and John in a threatening manner regarding their teaching, but: “When they saw the courage of Peter and John and realized that they were unschooled, ordinary men, they were astonished and they took note that these men had been with Jesus” (Acts 4:13). It was the courage of the two apostles, not their learning or eloquence, that was a witness to the Jewish priests and religious leaders. It is doubtless not a coincidence that shortly after that we are told: “So the word of God spread. The number of disciples in Jerusalem increased rapidly, and a large number of priests became obedient to the faith” (Acts 6:7).

Acting with courage even helps to confirm our own dedication to God and his calling. We need faith to have courage and courage to express our faith. The apostle Paul showed this when he wrote: “I eagerly expect and hope that I will in no way be ashamed, but will have sufficient courage so that now as always Christ will be exalted in my body, whether by life or by death” (Philippians 1:20).

So the words of Christ and the disciples he taught show the unending need for courage in our personal lives and in doing the work we are given to do. Courage is especially needed to withstand evil and wrongdoing – to resist what is wrong in our own lives and in society, especially if we feel we are alone in carrying on the fight. But courage is contagious, and our actions invariably will inspire others. Finally, courageous living demonstrates our faith – courage is faith in action. Courage and our beliefs work hand in hand. We should never forget that the effect of courage on Christianity can be considerable, and the effect of Christianity on courage can be enormous. Take courage – be encouraged!

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