

Encourage One Another

By Bonnie Rushmore

Part 1

Before we can encourage others, we need to have a clear understanding of the word "encourage." Webster's defines the word, "1: to inspire with courage, spirit, or hope: hearten, 2: to spur on: stimulate, 3: to give help or patronage to: foster." ¹ Synonyms for encourage would be "hearten, inspirit or embolden." ² A look at the Greek meaning for the word "encourage" will help one to understand the biblical concept of encourage. The various Greek words translated as encourage have slightly different definitions. One word means, "to urge forward, persuade," as used in Acts 18:27. Another definition is "counsel, advice," as used in 1 Thessalonians 2:11 and 5:14, "signifying to stimulate to the discharge of the ordinary duties of life." This word is translated "to comfort" in John 11:19, 31. ³ Each of these Greek words, as well as the English definitions, has the same basic meaning: to lift the spirits or to urge someone to do better.

A single passage that shows the basic meaning of "encourage" is 2 Corinthians 1:3-5.
"Blessed be God, even the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies, and the God of all comfort; Who comforteth us in all our tribulation, that we may be able to comfort them which are in any trouble, by the comfort wherewith we ourselves are comforted of God. For as the sufferings of Christ abound in us, so our consolation also aboundeth by Christ."

Second Corinthians 1:3-5 does not use the English word "encourage," but the Greek words translated "comforteth," "comfort" and "comforted" are a form of encourage. The meaning of these words according to Vine's is "a calling to one's aid," then "an exhortation, encouragement." It is translated "encouragement" in Hebrews 6:18 ASV and "consolation" in the KJV. It is akin to the Greek word translated "encourage" in the KJV, meaning, "to beseech or exhort, encourage, comfort." ⁴

Our greatest encouragement or comfort will come from God. Knowing that one day we will have a home in heaven if we live a Christ centered life can be a strong sense of encouragement when the difficulties of life surround us. Just knowing that in heaven there will be no tears, crying, pain, sorrow or death (Revelation 21:4) can give us hope that someday, in heaven if not before, life will be better. Paul expressed this thought in 2 Corinthians 4:16-17.

"For which cause we faint not; but though our outward man perish, yet the inward man is renewed day by day. For our light affliction, which is but for a moment, worketh for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory."

Whatever we are facing will one day be better and can make us stronger because of the difficulty if we will allow it to teach us. The lesson may be to learn from our mistakes if the difficulty is because of an error on our part and the difficulty can help us to assist others who face similar difficulties. Paul told the Corinthians that God comforted him during his trials so that he would be better prepared to comfort those facing similar troubles. This applies to us today. Anyone can express sorrow and offer comfort to one whose spouse has died. An individual who has suffered a similar loss will have a better understanding of the depth of his or her sorrow. I can offer biblical Scriptures of comfort and give practical advice gained from my studies on death; but, since I have not experienced the pain involved, I cannot understand the scope or depth of that pain nor do I know the effectiveness of the practical advice I might offer. My offers of comfort and encouragement are needed and wanted but they will not have the same effect as coming from one who has suffered like circumstances.

Bible knowledge can be a source of encouragement to us. "For whatsoever things were written aforetime were written for our learning, that we through patience and comfort of the scriptures might have hope" (Romans 15:4). Character studies of Bible individuals can help modern mankind realize God's people are the same today as they were when the Bible was written. Understanding the difficulties that these individuals faced and how they overcame or were overcome by them can give us courage and strength to endure. The answer to difficult family relationships, the causes of the problems and ways to overcome them can be found in the Bible. A few individuals to study could be: (1) David and his son Absalom (2 Samuel 15), (2) Adam and Eve whose son, Cain, killed his brother, Abel (Genesis 4:3-8), (3) Eli and his relationship with his sons (1 Samuel 3:13). Do you feel your family hates you? Study Joseph, who was sold into slavery

by his brothers, and the wonderful outcome for the Israelite nation (Genesis 37-50). Do you feel you are being persecuted? Think about Jesus who died on the cross as a sinless man, Paul who suffered much physical pain (2 Corinthians 11:23-28), Stephen who was stoned to death (Acts 7), as well as many of the prophets and others who were persecuted (Hebrews 11:32-40).

A character study of biblical individuals who exhibited acts of encouragement will help us see the importance of encouraging others. Dorcas, who was known for her "good works and almsdeeds," saw a need and did what she could to help with that need. At her death, the widows were weeping and showed Peter the garments she had made (Acts 9:32-43). Dorcas was an encourager. Barnabas, whose name means "consolation," was an encourager (Acts 4:36). When Paul and Barnabas were preparing to begin the second missionary journey, Barnabas wanted to take John Mark. Paul refused to take him because he left the group during the first missionary journey. Barnabas could have agreed with Paul and continued the journey as planned. However, he chose to take John Mark and go a different route (Acts 15:36-41). Because of Barnabas' confidence in and encouragement of John Mark, the events of one more faithful disciple of Jesus are recorded in the Bible. We know that John Mark was of great service to Paul in later years of Paul's ministry (2 Timothy 4:11). Perhaps, it was the encouragement of Barnabas that strengthened John Mark's faith and enabled him to be a better servant of Christ. Remember, it was Barnabas who brought Paul to the apostles after Paul's conversion (Acts 9:26-27). Study the epistles of First and Second Timothy and Titus to view Paul in the realm of an encourager. These three epistles were written to young preachers. Words of exhortation and encouragement abound in these epistles.

We also gain encouragement from others. This encouragement can be a personal investment from someone or of a general, nonspecific nature. Knowing that individuals are praying for our safety, recovery from an illness or injury, or letting us know that if we have a need they will be there to help, are examples of general, nonspecific encouragement.

We can often gain encouragement from others without them knowing it. I find encouragement in observing others in their dedication and service to God, especially when those individuals are suffering physical infirmities. Most congregations have members who can be counted on to be there each time the doors are open. When these individuals are not present for services, someone checks on them immediately after services because something must be wrong or they would have been there. Many times these individuals are there only after making great effort and enduring pain to arrive on time and be attentive to the lessons. I am encouraged to do better when I observe those who have reached the golden years and beyond still teaching and serving others as God would have us to do. When I am tired and feeling like I can do no more, I think of these individuals and know that if they can, I surely can press onward, too. We each, young or old, need to be the example from which others can gain encouragement (1 Corinthians 11:1).

Romans 12:15 states, "Rejoice with them that do rejoice, and weep with them that weep." This is a command to encourage others in a specific personal manner. However, before we can give personal, specific encouragement to anyone, we must know our fellow Christians well enough to be of assistance to them. We cannot fully encourage someone in a particular situation if we do not know the need. We can give general encouragement but not specific encouragement.

Part 2

Encouragement on a personal level can be done in various ways. Telling someone they were missed at the worship services can encourage them to be there the next time. Sometimes an individual must work and miss the services; knowing that we were missed can be an encouragement. If we are missing because "our heart is not in the right place," knowing we are missed can help to encourage us to make a greater effort to be there in the future. Sending a card or a letter to visitors will let visitors know they are welcome and encourage them to come back. We need to make the effort to speak to as many individuals as possible before and after each worship service. This will take an effort on our part, and for those who do not have an outgoing personality, a lot of courage. However, even those who faithfully attend each service feel better having their presence acknowledged. In larger congregations, we may need to habitually sit in a different area of the auditorium during services so that we can more easily greet those in attendance.

Praying for and with an individual who is facing a difficulty can be an encouragement. James instructs Christians to "Confess your faults one to another, and pray one for another, that ye may be healed. The

effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much" (James 5:16). Peter was comforted with the knowledge that Christians were praying for him while he was imprisoned (Acts 12:5). Encouragement is more than saying a prayer. Encouragement involves acts of kindness as well as kind, uplifting words. Paul stated in Galatians 6:2, "Bear ye one another's burdens, and so fulfil the law of Christ." We are to help and encourage one another.

A young mother who seems to be overwhelmed with the responsibilities of caring for her children, maintaining the home and being a loving wife needs our encouragement. She needs more than the words "it will get better with time." She needs our help with the children; a meal prepared by someone else after a hectic day would be a wonderful, welcome treat or volunteering to keep the children so she can have a quiet evening with her husband would be appreciated by both the husband and the wife. Assisting with the children during the worship services is an encouragement to return for the next service. I remember when our children were small, that I often wondered why I made the effort to attend the worship services. Trying to keep the children still and quiet was distracting to me as well as those around me. I did not have the luxury of assistance from my husband since he was in the pulpit presenting the lesson. It would have been easy to stay home or to let them play in the nursery. I am thankful I continued to attend and tried to consistently train the children to behave during services because each of our three children is a faithful Christian and an active member where he or she worships. Not long ago, one of our sons was telling me about the lack of interest of a teenage child in the congregation where he attends. What bothered him most was the fact that the child's parents have decided that this child could attend or not attend as he chose. Needless to say, the teenager rarely attends the worship services. Our son acknowledged that he was thankful that we did not give him the opportunity to choose not to attend worship services during his teenage years. He did not realize it at the time, but he needed the association with other Christians during a time when he was being tempted to live like those with whom he attended school.

We each need encouragement from time to time. We are quick to encourage those who are suffering physically or emotionally. The "shut-ins" need our encouragement. When someone has been shut-in for a long period of time, we tend to forget about him or her. A card, phone call or short visit will brighten their days. Stopping by to assist them with an activity they are no longer capable of doing would be an extra blessing. A wonderful activity for the teenagers would be to rake the leaves or wash the windows. It will teach our teens to serve others and let the shut-ins know they have not been forgotten.

I believe we unintentionally overlook some who need our encouragement. These are the individuals we take for granted on a weekly basis. When was the last time you told the song leader how much you appreciate his song leading? Have you ever thanked the Scripture reader for his part in the worship service? What about those who lead prayers or wait on the Lord's Table? These men need our encouragement. The young men just beginning to serve publicly and those who have been serving for many years need to hear "thank you" and "you did a good job." Many of these individuals are nervous and concerned about making a mistake. A kind word from others will help to lessen some of their apprehensions. When was the last time you told the Bible class teacher you appreciated the class or thanked your children's Bible class teacher? Some congregations have annual "Teacher Appreciation Dinners"; these are nice and show the teachers they are appreciated. They need something more than once a year. Missionaries, both overseas and closer to home, need our words of encouragement to "keep on" when facing discouragement and difficulties.

Have you ever thanked the individuals responsible for keeping the building clean, mowing the grass or shoveling the snow from the parking lot and sidewalks? Do you give any thought to who prepares the communion before each Sunday worship service? Do you thank the individual who prepares, prints and folds the bulletin? These individuals need our thanks and encouragement.

I am not suggesting we offer empty words of thanks. Our words need to be sincere and honest. I am reminded of an experience my husband had several years ago. After services, Louis was at rear of the auditorium standing beside the visiting preacher greeting those in attendance. One individual shook Louis' hand and thanked him "for the lesson." He had not preached that morning. The words seemed "empty" and without meaning.

We need to encourage the preacher students who may fill-in for our regular preacher. Their lessons may not be as in depth or presented as well as a man who has been preaching for several years, but I can assure

you with time and experience they will grow in Bible knowledge and abilities. These individuals work hard, have many sleepless nights, give up time with their families and many financial luxuries to better prepare themselves and their families to serve God. These families need our encouragement.

Do you offer words of encouragement to the preacher's wife and family? Many times a preacher does not work in the area his family or his wife's family resides. Being far from family can be a source of discouragement to the preacher's wife. The children do not have the same relationship with grandparents, aunts and uncles, and cousins as children who grow up in the same geographical area. This can be a sense of discouragement to the preacher's family. Sometimes family plans have to be cancelled, postponed or shortened because of an emergency situation with one of the members of the congregation. The preacher and his family need our encouragement.

The elders and their families need our encouragement. Many unpleasant and difficult decisions have to be made by the elders. We may not agree with the decision made every time, but if that decision does not conflict with Bible teaching, we must abide by the decision of the elders (Hebrews 13:17). We need to let the elders know we appreciate them and encourage them to continue watching for our souls.

Being an encourager is easy for some. For others it takes courage. We may be afraid of saying the wrong thing or do not know what to say. Think about how you would feel if you were in that situation. What would you want someone to say to you? Sometimes words are not necessary. Just being there can make a difference. Be an encourager and make a difference in someone's life. Remember we all need encouragement from time to time.