

‘Encourage one another’, 1 Thess. 5. 11. Bethesda Bible Teaching. 6 September 2009.

As you know, we are in the middle of a series focused on our responsibilities to ‘one another’.

I was rather surprised to find no less than 57 verses in the New Testament which use the phrase "one another" or "each other" in the context of our spiritual responsibilities the one to the other – and, yes, I counted them myself.

This morning our topic is ‘encourage one another’, and our set text is 1 Thessalonians 5 verse 11 – ‘encourage one another and build one another up, just as you are doing’.

And this very verse raises the question of how we should translate the word we have rendered ‘encourage’. Certainly this particular word has a very wide range of meanings – spanning : ‘to summon’, ‘to invoke’, ‘to entreat’, ‘to exhort’, ‘to comfort’ – and, as you will gather, ‘to strengthen and encourage’.

And it is not always easy to decide which is the best translation in any given verse. In most cases the context is a good guide but even that is not always decisive – as the variety of translations of some verses prove.¹

You will therefore have to bear with me if your favourite version differs in some cases from the translation I am using this morning.

But whether or not we agree over how some of our passages today should be translated, I am sure that we would all agree that there are times when everyone of us needs encouragement. I don’t need to tell you that there are many things which conspire to discourage and depress us. By way of example, globally we have only to think of the militant atheism here in the West and of the rising tide of Islam around the world. At local church level, we have only to think of Bethesda’s ageing population and the seeming poor response to the gospel. And on a personal level, we have only to think of serious health issues and the agonising family problems which many face.

But it is clear from his writings that even the apostle Paul both needed and appreciated encouragement in his service for God.²

The word translated ‘encourage’ in our text this morning rather dominates what we know as Paul’s second letter to the Corinthians – where it appears 29 times in all³ – stretching from his opening paragraph⁴ right through to his closing paragraph.⁵

In that letter, the apostle has much to say of his need for – and appreciation of – encouragement – especially in chapters 1 and 7.

Just note how the very opening paragraph, verses 3 to 7 of chapter 1, is saturated with the word – which puts in an appearance no less than 10 times in only five verses.

Towards the beginning of chapter 7, Paul tells how, when he was experiencing a period of great discouragement, God stepped in to encourage him ... ‘When we came into Macedonia’, he recalled, ‘...without were fightings, within were fears. But God, who encourages the downcast, encouraged us by the coming of Titus; and not by his coming only, but also by the encouragement with which he was encouraged over you; reporting to us your eager longing, your mourning, and your zeal for me’.

With Paul’s experience in mind, let nobody say that they have spiritually outgrown the need for encouragement.

And I can assure you that, if we heed the exhortation of 1 Thessalonians 5 to ‘encourage one another’ – and we can hardly miss the tribute which Paul paid to the Thessalonians : ‘as indeed you are doing’ ... if we heed his exhortation, we will be in the best of company. For, according to the New Testament, each Person of the Godhead is engaged in encouraging God’s people.

We have already noted from 2 Corinthians 1 that God the Father is the great Encourager – the ‘God of all encouragement; who’, Paul testified, ‘encourages us’.⁶

But then, at the close of 2 Thessalonians 2 the apostle expressed to the believers his desire that ‘our Lord Jesus Christ Himself’ should ‘encourage your hearts’.⁷ And then in Acts 9 Luke reports how ‘the church throughout all Judaea and Galilee and Samaria’ walked ‘in the fear of the Lord and in the encouragement of the Holy Spirit’.⁸ Oh yes, if we ‘encourage one another’ we are in the very best of company!

Doubtless there will be times when there is no Christian friend around to encourage us and we will need to encourage ourselves. We find in 1 Samuel 30 that David faced just such a situation. Everything seemed against him. He had lost his city and his family, and then, to cap it all, his own men spoke of stoning him. David wasn’t having a good day! But it was then - at his lowest point that ‘David encouraged himself in the Lord his God’.

But our subject this morning is not that of encouraging *ourselves*, but that of encouraging 'one another'.

And it is certainly worth noting from 2 Corinthians 7 that the Lord encouraged Paul, not directly – as He might, for example, by speaking to him Himself⁹ or by sending an angel to do so¹⁰ (both of which He did at times according to the Book of Acts) – but He encouraged Paul through others; namely through Titus and the Corinthians themselves. Nor was this the only time when Paul received encouragement from others. He told the Colossian church, for instance, how three Jewish Christians had 'been an encouragement' to him.¹¹

It comes as no surprise therefore that someone who himself benefited so much from the ministry of encouragement should, as occasion demanded, take the opportunity of sending his co-workers to encourage others ... whether that was Timothy to Thessalonica,¹² or Tychicus to Colosse.¹³

We find then no shortage of 'encouragers' on the pages of scripture.

But for today I want to single out just two – two men who stand out to me as great examples of the ministry of encouragement – one from each Testament.

From the Old Testament, I have chosen Saul's son Jonathan – a man who has been well described as 'the Old Testament Barnabas'¹⁴ ... Barnabas being someone who very much lived up to his name – his name meaning 'Son of Encouragement'¹⁵ – and encourage others he most certainly did – as witness at Antioch, where, Luke reports in Acts 11, he 'encouraged all with purpose of heart to cleave to the Lord'.

At the time I have in mind, David was fleeing from King Saul.

'Saul sought him every day', we read in 1 Samuel 23 verse 14, but at a critical moment, so the passage continues, 'Jonathan Saul's son arose, and went to David into the wood, and strengthened his hand in God'.

Jonathan's visit and words of encouragement couldn't have come at a better time for the son of Jesse – sandwiched as they were between the base ingratitude of the men of Keilah¹⁶ and the treachery of the men of Ziph.¹⁷

But if David couldn't rely on the gratitude of those he had recently risked his life to save from the Philistines (the men of Keilah), or on those within his own tribal territory of Judah (the Ziphites), on whom could he rely? Ironically, on the son of his relentless pursuer.

Jonathan's purpose in coming to David was clearly to do exactly what he did – namely, to strengthen and encourage David 'in God'. Don't miss those last words! In effect, Jonathan strengthened David by putting David's weak hand into God's almighty hand! Here, as often, the most effective *encouragement* meant instilling *courage* into someone who was *discouraged* by lifting that person's eyes and thoughts *towards God*.

Jonathan strengthened David's hand 'in God' – by bringing him something far better than either more soldiers or more supplies – by bringing him words! No, not harsh words about Saul – for this noble son of a king was careful to let not one disloyal word escape his lips – but marvellous words of encouragement.

'And he said to him, Fear not'. Is that all? Just a nice sentiment, without any real substance or foundation? Not at all! Jonathan revived David's spirit by pointing him to the sure and certain fulfilment of God's promise to him and of God's purpose for him.

But leaving my Old Testament example of encouraging others, out of many candidates in the New Testament, I have chosen the writer to Hebrews – who himself described his epistle as a 'word of encouragement',¹⁸ and who, in that epistle, more than once, exhorted his readers to 'encourage one another'.¹⁹

And those to whom he wrote certainly needed all the encouragement they could get. For they were exposed to enormous pressures and trials. The writer bears them record in chapter 10 that they had earlier accepted – and accepted joyfully – the plundering of their possessions,²⁰ and reminds them in chapter 13 that they had 'not yet' resisted to the point of shedding their blood²¹ – with the ominous implication that, *in the future*, some of them at least would lose *their lives* just as, *in the past*, they had lost *their goods*.

And, as might be expected, some of them at least were feeling weary and disheartened,²² and had in effect taken their feet of the pedals.

The writer encouraged them by reminding them of the spiritual wealth which was theirs – of those things which, as he said, they 'had'²³ – by reminding them, among other things, of God's faithfulness to His promises²⁴ and of the unshakeable kingdom which was theirs²⁵ – and by pointing them to the Lord Jesus²⁶.

It was in the light of such glorious blessings that he encouraged them, not only to 'go in'²⁷ and to 'go out'²⁸ but to 'go on'.²⁹

Putting my Old and New Testament examples together, we find that those they encouraged – both David and the original readers of the Hebrew letter – had much in common – not least in that they had lost many of their possessions and that their lives were then in real danger. And I note that both Jonathan and the writer of the Hebrew letter tackle these situations in much the same way – in that they both point in the same direction ... upwards.

And we do well to follow their examples – to 'encourage one another' by directing one another's eyes to the ultimate source of our encouragement as Christians – to God and to His word ... remembering that Paul spoke to the Romans of 'the encouragement of the scriptures'.³⁰

Although I must add that undoubtedly there are occasions when we can encourage one another greatly by recounting how, on a personal experience level, God has proved Himself faithful to us in the past. Indeed, who knows but that one of the reasons we passed through that earlier experience was that, as was true in the case of the apostle Paul, we 'may be able to encourage those who are in any tribulation whatever, through the encouragement with which we ourselves are encouraged of God'.³¹

And indeed there's no doubt that sincere words of appreciation for the efforts and often sterling work being put in by others often prove a source of real encouragement to them.

In chapter 41 of his prophecy, Isaiah describes the fear and trembling of the heathen nations in the face of God's power. But instead of turning to Him they proceed to encourage themselves in their idolatry.³²

'Everyone helps his neighbour', Isaiah reports, 'and says to his brother, "Be strong!" So the craftsman encourages the goldsmith, and he who smoothes with the hammer encourages him who strikes the anvil, saying of the welding, "It is good"; and they strengthen it (their idol) with nails so that it cannot be moved'.

Although we unreservedly condemn their idolatry, we can certainly take a leaf out of their book when it comes to us encouraging each other in *our* work for God. When somebody else is doing a good job, it doesn't cost a great deal – if anything – to tell them so. In a day when there is more than enough criticism to go around, we may never know just how much one simple compliment or other gesture of encouragement may mean to them.

As you are aware, this week we are poised to recommence many of our assembly activities after the summer break.

And, as we do this, through His word this morning, the Lord would encourage *us* to encourage *one another*.

And, for our encouragement, let us remember that no matter how menial our task and contribution, we each 'serve the Lord Christ'³³ and that our labour is not in vain 'in the Lord'.³⁴

Footnotes

¹ For example, the word occurs in 1 Thessalonians 3 verse 2 and is translated in differing ways : (i) '... to establish you, and to *comfort* you concerning your faith' (King James Version); '... to establish and *exhort* you in your faith' (English Standard Version); and '... to strengthen and *encourage* you in your faith' (New International Version).

² Compare the following anecdote about Abraham Lincoln. "About halfway through a PBS program on the Library of Congress, Dr. Daniel Boorstin, the Librarian of Congress, brought out a little blue box from a small closet that once held the library's rarities. The label on the box read: '*Contents of the President's Pockets on the Night of April 14, 1865*'. Since that was the fateful night Abraham Lincoln was assassinated, every viewer's attention was seized. Boorstin then proceeded to remove the items in the small container and display them on camera. There were five things in the box: 1) a handkerchief, embroidered 'A. Lincoln', 2) a country boy's pen knife, 3) a spectacles case repaired with string 4) a purse containing a \$5 bill -- Confederate money(!) and 5) some old and worn newspaper clippings. 'The clippings,' said Boorstin, 'were concerned with the great deeds of Abraham Lincoln. And one of them actually reports a speech by John Bright which says that Abraham Lincoln is 'one of the greatest men of all times.' In 1865 that was not a prevalent opinion. The President's critics were fierce and many. There is something touchingly pathetic in the mental picture of this great leader seeking solace and self-assurance from a few old newspaper clippings as he reads them under the flickering flame of a candle all alone in the Oval Office.'" From '*The Quest for Character*' by Charles Swindoll, pages 60-61. See also ...

<http://www.loc.gov/loc/lcib/0012/bicentennial.html>.

³ The verb (*parakaleō*) 18 times and the corresponding noun 11 times.

⁴ 2 Cor. 1. 3-7.

⁵ 2 Cor. 13. 11.

⁶ 2 Cor. 1. 3-4.

⁷ 2 Thess. 2. 16-17.

⁸ Acts 9. 31.

⁹ Compare Acts 18. 9 and Acts 23. 11.

¹⁰ Compare Acts 27. 23-24.

¹¹ Col. 4. 10-11. Compare : 'I am glad of the coming of Stephanas and Fortunatus and Achaicus: for ... they have *refreshed* ('to give rest from toil'; the word of Matt. 11. 28) my spirit', 1 Cor. 16. 18, and, 'The Lord give mercy unto the house of Onesiphorus; for he *oft refreshed* ('to cause someone to feel cool) me', 2 Tim. 1. 16.

¹² 1 Thess. 3. 2.

¹³ Col. 4. 8.

¹⁴ In at least one other way, Jonathan is the Barnabas of the Old Testament. For when it became clear to Barnabas that God had chosen Paul to assume the dominant role in their partnership, he gladly stepped aside and became Paul's loyal supporter.

¹⁵ Acts 4. 36; Acts 11. 22-23.

¹⁶ 1 Sam. 23. 10-12.

¹⁷ 1 Sam. 23. 19-20.

¹⁸ Heb. 13. 22.

¹⁹ Heb. 3. 13; 10. 25.

²⁰ Heb. 10. 34.

²¹ Heb. 13. 4.

²² Heb. 12. 12.

²³ Heb. 4. 14; 6. 19; 8. 1; 13.10.

²⁴ Heb. 10. 23.

²⁵ Heb. 12. 28.

²⁶ Heb. 12. 2.

²⁷ Heb. 10. 22.

²⁸ Heb. 13. 13.

²⁹ Heb. 6. 1.

³⁰ Rom. 15. 4; cf. 1 Thess. 4. 18 and Heb. 6. 17-18.

³¹ 2 Cor. 1. 4.

³² Isa. 41. 6-7.

³³ Col. 3. 22-23.

³⁴ 1 Cor. 15. 58.