

‘Encourage one another’.

Many of you will be aware of the famous advertising slogan of the H. J Heinz Company; namely, ‘57 varieties’. Well, I confess that I was rather surprised to find that there are no less than 57 verses in the New Testament which use the phrase ‘one another’ or the phrase ‘each other’ in the context of our spiritual responsibilities the one to the other – and, yes, I counted them myself.

The following list represents a sample :

- ‘Have peace with one another’;¹
- ‘Wash one another’s feet’;²
- ‘Love one another’;³
- ‘Be kindly affectionate to one another’;⁴
- ‘Receive one another’;⁵
- ‘Admonish one another’;⁶
- ‘Greet one another’;⁷
- ‘Serve one another’;⁸
- ‘Bear one another’s burdens’;⁹
- ‘Be kind to one another’;¹⁰
- ‘Forgiving one another’;¹¹
- ‘Speaking to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs’;¹²
- ‘Submitting to one another’;¹³
- ‘Bearing with one another’;¹⁴
- ‘Comfort one another’;¹⁵
- ‘Edify one another’;¹⁶
- ‘Exhort one another’;¹⁷
- ‘Consider one another’;¹⁸
- ‘Pray for one another’;¹⁹
- ‘Having compassion for one another’;²⁰ and
- ‘Be hospitable to one another’.²¹

For this meeting, I have chosen the title and topic: ‘Encourage one another’. And my text for today is 1 Thessalonians 5 verse 11: **‘Encourage one another and build one another up, just as you are doing’**.

And, at the outset, our text raises the question of how we should translate the word which I have just quoted as ‘encourage’. Certainly, this particular word²² has a very wide range of meanings, spanning: ‘to summon’, ‘to invoke’, ‘to entreat’, to exhort’, ‘to comfort’, and ‘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 an adequate guide, but even that is not always decisive, as the variety of translations of some New Testament verses prove.²³

You will therefore have to bear with me if your favourite version differs in some cases from the translation I am using this morning.²⁴ But whether or not we all agree over how *some* of the passages which I quote today should be translated, I am sure that we will all agree that there are times when *everyone* of us needs encouragement.

I hardly 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 assemblies closing, in many cases of an ageing population, and of the seeming poor response to the gospel. And *on a personal level*, we have only to think of serious health issues and/or the agonising family problems which many face.

But we can ‘take encouragement’ from the way in which we learn from his writings that even *the apostle Paul* both needed and appreciated encouragement in his service for God.

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 no less than 29 times in all²⁵ ... stretching from his opening paragraph²⁶ right through to his closing paragraph.²⁷

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 there puts in an appearance no less than ten 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 ('conflicts', 'combats'), within were fears. But He who encourages those that are brought low, even God, 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; relating 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 do 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'), 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'.²⁸ 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'.²⁹ 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*'.³⁰ Without question, if we 'encourage one another' we are in the very best of company!

But, I have no doubt that there will be times when we have no Christian friend around to encourage us, and when 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 to the Amalekites, and then, to cap it all, his own men spoke of stoning him.³¹ David certainly wasn't having a good day! But it was then, at his lowest point, that 'David *encouraged himself* in the Lord his God'.³²

When thinking of situations in which we sometimes need to encourage ourselves, I am reminded of the following moving anecdote told by Charles Swindoll about Abraham Lincoln.

'About halfway through a Public Broadcasting Service 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: (i) a handkerchief, embroidered 'A. Lincoln', (ii) a country boy's pen knife, (iii) a spectacles case repaired with string, (iv) a purse containing a \$5 bill -- Confederate money!, and (v) 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'.³³

But, thank God, we can do better than President Lincoln. We can follow David's example, and, when the going gets tough, we can encourage ourselves *in the Lord our God!*

But my subject today is not really 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 Himself,³⁴ or by sending an angel to do so,³⁵ both of which He did at times) - but He encouraged Paul through others; namely, through Titus and the Corinthians themselves.³⁶ Nor was this the only time when Paul received encouragement from others. He informed the Colossian church, for instance, how Aristarchus, Mark and Jesus Justus, three Jewish Christians, had 'been an encouragement' to him.³⁷

It comes as no surprise to us, therefore, that the man who himself benefited so much from the ministry of encouragement from others should, as occasion arose, take the opportunity of sending his co-workers to encourage others, whether that was Timothy to encourage 'the church' at Thessalonica,³⁸ or Tychicus to encourage 'the saints and faithful brethren' at Colosse.³⁹

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

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

From the *Old Testament*, I have chosen Saul's son Jonathan. Jonathan has been well described as 'an Old Testament Barnabas'.⁴⁰ For Barnabas was someone who, in his service for God, very much lived up to his name, a name which means 'Son of Encouragement'.⁴¹ And encourage others Barnabas most certainly did, as witness at Antioch, where, we are told, Barnabas 'encouraged all with purpose of heart to cleave to the Lord'.⁴²

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

'Saul sought him every day', we read in 1 Samuel 23,⁴³ but, at a critical moment, 'Jonathan Saul's son arose, and went to David into the wood, and strengthened his hand in God'.⁴⁴

Jonathan's visit and words of encouragement⁴⁵ couldn't have come at a better time for the son of Jesse, sandwiched as Jonathan's visit and words were between the base ingratitude of the men of Keilah⁴⁶ and the heartless treachery of the men of Ziph.⁴⁷

But if David couldn't rely (i) on the gratitude of those for whom he had recently risked his life to save them from the Philistines (the men of Keilah), or (ii) on those from 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 just what he did, namely, to strengthen ('to encourage'⁴⁸) David's hand 'in God'. Don't miss those last words! For, in effect, Jonathan strengthened David by *putting David's weak hand into God's almighty hand!*

Here, as often, the most effective *encouragement* meant *infusing 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 further supplies ... by bringing him *words!* No, not harsh words about Saul (for this noble son of a king never let so much as one disloyal word escape from his lips), but helpful words of encouragement.

'And he said to him, Fear not'.⁴⁹ But was that all? Just a nice sentiment, without any real substance or foundation? Certainly not! Jonathan revived David's spirit by pointing him to the sure and certain fulfilment of God's purpose for him.

But, moving on from my *Old Testament* example of encouraging others, out of the many candidates in the *New Testament*, I have chosen the writer of the epistle to the Hebrews ... to a man who himself described his epistle as a 'word of encouragement',⁵⁰ and who, in that epistle, more than once, exhorted his readers to 'encourage one another'.⁵¹

And I can tell you that those to whom he wrote most 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 had accepted 'joyfully', the plundering of their possessions,⁵² and he draws their attention in chapter 12 to the fact that they had 'not yet' resisted to the point of shedding their blood,⁵³ with the ominous implication that, *in the foreseeable future*, some of them at least would lose *their lives* just as, *in the past*, they had lost *their goods*.

And, as might well be expected, some of them were feeling weary and disheartened,⁵⁴ and had, in effect, 'taken their feet off the pedals'.

The writer encouraged them by reminding them of the spiritual wealth which was theirs ... by reminding them of those things which, as he said, they 'had'⁵⁵ ... by reminding them, among other things, of (i) God's faithfulness to His promises,⁵⁶ and of (ii) the unshakeable kingdom which was theirs⁵⁷ ... and by pointing them off to the Lord Jesus Himself.⁵⁸

It was in the light of such stupendous blessings that the writer encouraged them, not only to 'go in',⁵⁹ and to 'go out',⁶⁰ but to 'go on'.⁶¹

Putting together my Old and New Testament examples, we find that those who they encouraged (namely, (i) David and (ii) 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 very lives were then in real danger. And I note that both Jonathan and the writer of the Hebrew letter tackled these situations in much the same way, pointing others in the same direction ... upwards.

And we do well to follow their examples, and to 'encourage one another' by directing one another's eyes to the ultimate source of our encouragement as Christians – to *God* ... and, of course, to *His word* (remembering that Paul once spoke of 'the encouragement of the scriptures'⁶²).

I was struck by the following story about C. S. Lewis:

'In the latter years of his life, C. S. Lewis had a remarkable correspondence with an anonymous woman from America.⁶³ In his letters, Lewis urged the woman to deal with life in an emotionally honest way, acknowledging grief, fear and anger openly. He also warns her about the danger of allowing anger and fear to drive her away from God. His letters refer often to suffering and the difficulty of dealing with abrasive people. He also writes regularly about prayer and its place in the spiritual life. In all the letters, there are three themes that continually surface: honestly dealing with our emotional state, responding graciously to trials and trying people and being diligent in our prayer life.

'The letters are fascinating to read, but what is most striking is that Lewis bothered to write them at all. He confessed to being often overwhelmed by his workload, and by this time in his life he could hardly write because of rheumatic pain in his arm. Yet, as Clyde S. Kilby notes, the reason Lewis continued the correspondence was because "Lewis believed that *taking time out to advise or encourage another Christian* was both a humbling of one's talents before the Lord and also *as much the work of the Holy Spirit as producing a book*". Being a source of encouragement to a fellow Christian was as meaningful to him as anything else he did'.⁶⁴

Let us remember also that there are occasions when we can encourage one another by recounting how, in our own personal experience, God has proved Himself faithful to us in the past. Indeed, one of the reasons we were called on to pass through that earlier experience might well be, as was certainly true in the case of the apostle Paul, that we 'may be able to encourage those who are in any tribulation whatever, *through the encouragement with which we ourselves are encouraged of God*'.⁶⁵

On top of which there can be no doubt that sincere words of appreciation for the efforts and sterling work of others will often prove a source of great encouragement to them.

In that connection, I note how Isaiah, when describing the fear and trembling of the heathen nations in the face of God's power, points out that, instead of turning to Him, they proceed to encourage themselves in their idolatry.⁶⁶ 'Everyone helps his neighbour', Isaiah reports, 'and says to his brother, "Be strong!" So the craftsman *encourages* the goldsmith, and he who smooths 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 the idolatry of these men, we can certainly take a leaf out of the idolatrous workmen's book when it comes to 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 at all, to tell them so. In a day when there is more than enough criticism to go around, we never know how much just one simple compliment or other gesture of encouragement may mean to one of our fellow-workers.

I close with the earnest wish that, through His word today, the Lord *would encourage us to encourage one another*.

And, for *our* encouragement, let us remember, no matter how menial our task and no matter how seemingly small our contribution, that we each 'serve the Lord Christ'⁶⁷ and that our 'labour is not in vain in the Lord'.⁶⁸

Notes

¹ Mark 9. 50.

² John 13. 14.

³ John 13. 34, 35; 15. 12, 17; Rom. 13. 8; 1 Thess. 3. 12; 4. 9; 1 Pet. 1. 22; 4. 8; 1 John 3. 11, 23; 4. 7, 11; 2 John 5.

⁴ Rom. 12. 10.

⁵ Rom. 15. 7.

⁶ Rom. 15. 14.

⁷ Rom. 16. 16.

⁸ Gal. 5. 13.

⁹ Gal. 6. 2.

¹⁰ Eph. 4. 32.

¹¹ Eph. 4. 32; Col. 3. 13.

¹² Eph. 5. 19.

¹³ Eph. 5. 21.

¹⁴ Col. 3. 13.

¹⁵ 1 Thess. 4. 18.

¹⁶ 1 Thess. 5. 11.

¹⁷ Heb. 3. 13; 10. 25.

¹⁸ Heb. 10. 24.

¹⁹ James 5. 16.

²⁰ 1 Pet. 3. 8.

²¹ 1 Pet. 4. 9.

²² The Greek word 'παρακαλεω'.

²³ For example, the word occurs in 1 Thessalonians 3 verse 2 and is translated in various ways: (i) '... to establish you, and to *comfort* you concerning your faith' (King James Version); '... (ii) to establish and *exhort* you in your faith' (English Standard Version); and (iii) '... to strengthen and *encourage* you in your faith' (New International Version).

²⁴ English Standard Version.

²⁵ The verb (παρακαλεω) occurs 18 times, and the corresponding noun 11 times.

²⁶ 2 Cor. 1. 3-7.

²⁷ 2 Cor. 13. 11.

²⁸ 2 Cor. 1. 3-4.

²⁹ 2 Thess. 2. 16-17.

³⁰ Acts 9. 31.

³¹ 1 Sam. 30. 1-6a.

³² 1 Sam. 30. 6b.

³³ Charles Swindoll, *'The Quest for Character'*, pages 60-61. See also ... <http://www.loc.gov/loc/lcib/0012/bicentennial.html>.

³⁴ See Acts 18. 9 and Acts 23. 11.

³⁵ See Acts 27. 23-24.

³⁶ 2 Cor. 7. 6-7.

³⁷ Col. 4. 10-11. Compare Paul's comments elsewhere: 'I am glad of the coming of Stephanas and Fortunatus and Achaicus: for ... they have *refreshed* my spirit', 1 Cor. 16. 18, and, 'The Lord give mercy unto the house of Onesiphorus; for he oft *refreshed* me', 2 Tim. 1. 16.

³⁸ 1 Thess. 3. 2.

³⁹ Col. 4. 8.

⁴⁰ Bob Deffinbaugh, *'Jonathan, an Old Testament Barnabas'*, accessed at <https://www.biblicaleldership.com/jonathan-old-testament-barnabas/>.

⁴¹ Acts 4. 36.

⁴² Acts 11. 23. In at least one other way, Jonathan was 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. (Note, that, in general, 'Barnabas and Saul', Acts 11. 30; 12. 25; 13. 2, 7, became 'Paul and Barnabas', Acts 13. 43, 46, 50.) In similar fashion, we know that Jonathan, had he survived Gilboa, would have been happy to play second fiddle to David, 1 Sam. 23. 17.

⁴³ 1 Sam. 23. 14.

⁴⁴ 1 Sam. 23. 16.

⁴⁵ 1 Sam. 23. 16-17.

⁴⁶ 1 Sam. 23. 10-12.

⁴⁷ 1 Sam. 23. 19-20.

⁴⁸ The word (*גָּרַחַח*) translated 'strengthen' in 1 Sam. 23. 16 is one and the same as that translated 'encourage' in 1 Sam. 30. 6.

⁴⁹ 1 Sam. 23. 17.

⁵⁰ Heb. 13. 22.

⁵¹ Heb. 3. 13; 10. 25.

⁵² Heb. 10. 34.

⁵³ Heb. 12. 4.

⁵⁴ Heb. 12. 12.

⁵⁵ Heb. 4. 14; 6. 19; 8. 1; 13. 10.

⁵⁶ Heb. 10. 23.

⁵⁷ Heb. 12. 28.

⁵⁸ Heb. 12. 2.

⁵⁹ Heb. 10. 22.

⁶⁰ Heb. 13. 13.

⁶¹ Heb. 6. 1.

⁶² Rom. 15. 4; cf. 1 Thess. 4. 18 and Heb. 6. 17-18.

⁶³ 'C. S. Lewis, *Letters to an American Lady*', edited by Clyde S. Kilby (Eerdmans, 1967).

⁶⁴ Quoted from Kenneth Boa, '*Encouragement*', accessed at https://bible.org/seriespage/encouragement#P85_24928.

⁶⁵ 2 Cor. 1. 4.

⁶⁶ Isa. 41. 6-7.

⁶⁷ Col. 3. 22-23.

⁶⁸ 1 Cor. 15. 58.