Encouragement for Beginners: How to Strengthen a Soul in God

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A scarcity of encouragement can become a crisis for any soul. Can you remember a time you really needed encouragement but didn't receive it?

Encouragement often runs dry in our churches because we fail to prioritize and practice it, but some of us fail to encourage one another because we don't really know what encouragement *is*. We assume encouragement is merely some word of comfort or affirmation — something to make us feel better about ourselves — when what our souls really need to hear is something that deepens our hope and confidence *in God*.

To encourage is to give *courage* — not simply to console or compliment someone (and certainly not to flatter), but to strengthen a heart for risk or adversity. Every Christian needs a steady stream of courage to endure suffering, to reject temptation, to sacrifice in love, to embrace discipline, to persevere in ministry, to trust and obey God.

And we will not survive long on the light and superficial inspiration that sells by the millions. We do not need hearts more filled with self; we need hearts regularly inflamed with God. We need soul-anchoring, heart-stirring, love-unleashing *encouragement*.

Church in Need of Encouragement

The church in Thessalonica seemed to suffer from a deficit of encouragement. Why else would the apostle Paul urge them, again and again, to encourage one another?

> *Encourage one another* with these words. (1 Thessalonians 4:18)
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> *Encourage one another* and build one another up. (1 Thessalonians 5:11)
>
> We urge you, brothers, admonish the idle, *encourage the fainthearted*, help the weak, be patient with them all. (1 Thessalonians 5:14)

> "We do not need hearts more filled with self; we need hearts regularly inflamed with God."

Why such a serious and repeated charge? Because the apostle had seen firsthand the troubles the Thessalonian church faced. The believers in Thessalonica were not, like so many

in more affluent and comfortable places today, merely low on self-esteem. These were embattled men and women who were hated and threatened for their faith in Jesus.

When Paul and Silas preached the gospel there, many believed and joined the church (Acts 17:4), but a jealous mob rose to oppose them (Acts 17:5). Even when Paul and Silas left the persecution in Thessalonica behind and went on to Berea, the mob was so outraged that they followed them there, “agitating and stirring up the crowds” (Acts 17:13). And while Paul and Silas could leave town, the Thessalonian believers stayed and made their homes in the fire. They “received the word in much affliction,” 1 Thessalonians 1:6 says, and they would now have to hold fast in much affliction. Therefore, they needed real, meaningful, compelling encouragement.

Encouragement of a Father

As Paul exhorted the Thessalonians to encourage one another, he also gave them (and us) a godly example of encouragement to follow.

> You know how, like a father with his children, we exhorted each one of you *and encouraged you* and charged you to walk in a manner worthy of God, who calls you into his own kingdom and glory. (1 Thessalonians 2:11–12)

Notice how he sets this kind of encouragement next to a complementary kind of love a few verses earlier: “We were gentle among you, *like a nursing mother* taking care of her own children” (1 Thessalonians 2:7). We were gentle among you like a mother, and we encouraged and charged you like a father. That picture gives encouragement a masculine strength, weight, and urgency that we don’t always associate with encouragement. Paul was both gentle like a mother and tough like a father, both understanding and pleading, both compassionate and assertive.

And how did he encourage them in this case? *Not* by saying, “Everything’s going to be alright,” but rather by charging them, “Walk in a manner worthy of God.” Encouragement sought to compel them out of spiritual sluggishness and complacency into a glad and disciplined *faithfulness*. How much of the encouragement we give and receive today sounds like that?

Facets of Encouragement

As we look more closely at the specific commands to encourage one another in 1 Thessalonians, we see more of the depth and complexity of real encouragement. Encouragement is not a simple reality or practice; it comes in various shapes and colors and

tones, in each case aiming to stimulate the courage needed to walk in a manner worthy of God. Notice three major threads of encouragement in this letter alone.

Comfort the Sorrowful

Some in the Thessalonian church were despairing over those who had died. Paul writes in 1 Thessalonians 4:13, “We do not want you to be uninformed about those who are asleep, that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope.” These younger believers grieved as the world did, as if the grave were the end, as if the dead would never live again. They feared, it seems, that those who died before Christ returned would never see him. This made their grief even more unbearable.

How does Paul encourage them? “Since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep” (1 Thessalonians 4:14). In fact, “The dead in Christ will rise first,” he tells them. “Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we will always be with the Lord” (1 Thessalonians 4:16–17). In Christ, those who have died will not remain dead. They will *live*, and be more alive than they ever were before, because they will finally live in the presence of the glorified Christ.

Then, in the next verse, “Therefore *encourage one another* with these words” (1 Thessalonians 4:18). Some are carrying a weight of sorrow or grief they cannot bear; therefore, encourage them. Strengthen their battered souls to endure heartache with hope. Remind them that all who have believed in the Lord Jesus will soon *always* be with him.

Awaken the Idle

Others in the Thessalonian church made the return of Christ an excuse for idleness in the meantime. If Christ is coming any time, why, they thought, would we keep working so hard? In a second letter to the church, the apostle says, “We hear that some among you walk in idleness, not busy at work, but busybodies” (2 Thessalonians 3:11). A spiritual sleepiness had fallen on some, producing negligence and laziness.

How does Paul encourage them?

> Let us not sleep, as others do, but let us keep awake and be sober . . . having put on the breastplate of faith and love, and for a helmet the hope of salvation. For God has not destined us for wrath, but to obtain salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, who died for us so that whether we are awake or asleep we might live with him. (1 Thessalonians 5:6–10)

While encouragement comes to console and strengthen those who are grieving, it strives to light a fire under sleepy souls. Strap on your breastplate. Put on your helmet. Arm yourselves for battle. Take action. Those who sleep through this war are destined for wrath. Those who will inherit the kingdom of God, however, stay awake, alert, and diligent.

Then, in the next verse, "Therefore *encourage one another* and build one another up, just as you are doing" (1 Thessalonians 5:11). Awaken and compel the idle. Receive the work God has given you to do, and do it with all your heart, as unto the Lord and not men (Colossians 3:23–24). Remind one another of all that's at stake and of how serious the spiritual armies are that are lined up against us (Ephesians 6:12). "Take up the whole armor of God," as Paul says in Ephesians 6:13, "that you may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand firm."

Fortify the Fainthearted

Other believers in Thessalonica were not sleepy in idleness, but had grown weary under the weight of life in a fallen world.

"We urge you, brothers, admonish the idle, *encourage the fainthearted*, help the weak, be patient with them all" (1 Thessalonians 5:14). The word *fainthearted* appears only once in the New Testament, but it does appear several times in the Greek translation of the Old Testament. For instance, Proverbs 18:14, "A man's spirit will endure sickness, but *a crushed spirit* who can bear?" Do you know someone who seems crushed in spirit? Has your heart felt weighed down by life?

How does God himself encourage the fainthearted? He does so twice through the prophet Isaiah, first in Isaiah 57:15. Notice the unusual kindness and compassion of God:

> Thus says the One who is high and lifted up, who inhabits eternity, whose name is Holy: "I dwell in the high and holy place, and also with him who is of a contrite and lowly spirit, to revive the spirit of *the lowly*, and to revive the heart of the contrite."

> "Who can fathom a God so mighty and yet so tender, so above and yet so near, so holy and yet so compassionate?"

Though God is high and lifted up, dwelling in the high, holy, and eternal heavens, he draws near to the fainthearted, to revive and strengthen us. Who can fathom a God so mighty and yet so tender, so above and yet so near, so holy and yet so compassionate?

Notice, however, how God encourages the fainthearted in Isaiah 35:4 with urgency and earnestness: "Say to those who have *an anxious heart*" — same word for *fainthearted* — "Be strong; fear not! Behold, your God will come with vengeance, with the recompense of God. He

will come and save you.” Anything you have suffered, God will repay. However bleak life may become, he will surely deliver the redeemed and repay any evil committed against you.

Do you know someone suffering from sorrow or grief, someone leaking hope in the storms of loss? Do you know others who have grown idle or complacent, making excuses to avoid what God has called them to do? Do you know some who are suffocating under the burdens they bear, living just barely above water? If so, how might you strengthen their souls in Christ? How might God use you to stir their confidence in him?