The Awkward Duty of Encouragement: How Men Strengthen Other Men

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Remember that old beer commercial? A father and son are fishing on a pier in a stereotypical guy situation. On the verge of tears, the grown son pronounces to the father, “Dad, you’re my dad, and I love you, man.” It’s super awkward, until Dad gives the punchline: “Johnny, you can’t have my beer.” It was humorous, and went viral, because guys know you don’t do that. Why is encouragement so awkward for guys?

I can hazard some guesses. It’s emotional. Guys get uncomfortable when guys get emotional. And when emotion goes over the top, they look silly. Men don’t like silly. Moreover, in today’s gender-confused world, guys wonder how to express themselves to other guys. So we don’t. At other times, it can make the one you’re trying to encourage uncomfortable. I remember trying to complement a young pastor who preached an excellent sermon, and his response was a mild rebuke: “You know, Mack, flattery is a sin.”

Why go out of my way when it’s easier just to stay quiet? Besides, most guys seem to be doing fine anyway, right? Encouragement, however, is not just a good idea, but a biblical command — yes, even for men.

We could come at encouragement from many angles, but I’d like to learn from how God encourages the apostle Paul while he was under arrest, headed for trial in Rome. The risen Christ stood by him and said, “Take courage, for as you have testified to the facts about me in Jerusalem, so you must testify also in Rome” (Acts 23:11). Encouragement here came in three parts: past, present, and future.

Revisit Past Faithfulness

If there’s anything I have learned in my life, it’s how forgetful I am of Christ’s care. I have never risked for God without seeing his faithfulness. From taking that big scary step to lead a dorm Bible study as a new believer to moving to Iraq to pastor a church when I was 60, God was with me in those steps (and thousands of others). Yet with every step, I needed encouragement from friends and family and deep dives into Scripture to remember God’s trustworthiness.

I’m not alone in my forgetfulness. The Bible often encourages us by calling us to remember God’s faithfulness. This shines particularly brightly in the Psalms as the writers encourage

God's people, even amid despair and fear, to remember our Lord's salvation (see Psalms 42–43).

No wonder our Lord has built remembrances into the believer's life, from the Passover meal in Exodus to the meal instituted by Jesus. Alongside these, we ought to regularly speak encouragement to one another. Paul, for instance, tells the Thessalonians, "Encourage one another and build one another up, just as you are doing" (1 Thessalonians 5:11).

Over and again, in both the Old Testament and the New, we're encouraged to remember the great salvation we have in Christ. That's the key: the gospel. We're called to encourage one another by remembering the work Jesus has accomplished on our behalf. So, encourage others specifically by reminding them of how God has worked in their past.

Take Heart in the Moment

The Bible also calls us to be encouraged in the moment. The greatest discouragements meet us in current moments: the hard news of a wayward child, the cancer diagnosis, the job loss, that unexplained darkness that descends upon our minds.

In Psalm 27:14, David says, "Wait for the Lord; be strong, and let your heart take courage; wait for the Lord!" This is patience in a moment of discouragement. The "take a deep breath; the Lord is with us" moment. When God encouraged Moses, the great promise was "I will go with you" (Exodus 33:14). God promises his presence in our consecutive moments.

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One repeated way encouragement happens in the Bible is through fellowship. What a difference it makes to be surrounded by faithful believers during our hardest days. Paul tells the Corinthians of the comfort that came to him "by the coming of Titus" (2 Corinthians 7:6). When Paul arrived in Rome and awaited trial, some faithful believers gathered where he was staying. "On seeing them, Paul thanked God and took courage" (Acts 28:14–16). No wonder the Christians I've known who have lived in discouragement were often out of fellowship.

By far, the way Christians are most encouraged in the Scriptures is to be pointed to our future. Again, Paul writes,

> The Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the voice of an archangel, and with the sound of the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first. 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. Therefore encourage one another with these words. (1 Thessalonians 4:16–18)

This verse is a direct command to encourage others with future grace.

So here is a basic summary of biblical encouragement: First, remember God's past faithfulness in your life. Recount to yourself (and others) the marvelous salvation that has come to those who love Jesus. Second, take a breath when discouragement comes, and wait on the Lord. He will come to you. He says he will be with us always. Practice being in fellowship with others. And third, take hold of our future hope in the gospel — that nothing we face will outstrip the glory for those who persevere to the end.

Practicing Encouragement as Men

How about some practical steps, especially for men encouraging other men? Here are five ideas to overcome the awkwardness. With each, keep in mind the past, present, and future divisions of encouragement.

1. Build a culture of encouragement.

Elders, in particular, should take the lead and make efforts to encourage other men. I don't mean giving out the "tried real hard" awards like the toddler soccer team. No, encourage those who take real steps to grow in the faith: a first sermon, a first teaching in a Sunday school class, or taking initiative to disciple a younger believer.

I spoke at a church recently, and after the evening prayer time the pastor asked the congregation for any encouraging words from the morning sermon. I have never had that happen before, and it was, well, encouraging. But what I most appreciated was the pastor's intentional development of a culture of encouragement.

2. Gossip good things about other men.

Men can be analytical creatures, which quickly devolves into criticism. Fight this by spreading good reports of other believers who are being faithful.

In Colossians 4:7–8, Paul says, "Tychicus will tell you all about my activities. He is a beloved brother and faithful minister, and fellow servant in the Lord. I have sent him to you for this very purpose, that you may know how we are and that he may encourage your hearts." Think of positive things to say about others, as Paul did for Tychicus. True, short, and genuine comments are enough.

3. Remember to encourage yourself.

I'm not taking you to the self-help section of the bookstore. Instead, I'm speaking more to a maxim that I find helpful: talk to yourself; don't listen to yourself — much like the psalmists do. The psalmist asks himself, "Why are you cast down, O my soul?" (Psalm 42:5). Then, he answers himself by encouraging himself with the truth about God.

Tell yourself God's truth. Don't listen to the voices in the night that plague you. Instead, talk to yourself about the gospel and the promises of God. Notice how much of the encouragement in the Scriptures — where the actual word *encourage* is used — doesn't pretend circumstances aren't dire or that everything will work out. Rather, it reminds us how great is our hope and how fantastic our future in Christ.

4. Encourage godly action.

Sometimes encouragement to righteousness is a kick in the pants. For example, Paul writes concerning the freeloaders in the Thessalonian church, "We command *and encourage* in the Lord Jesus Christ to do their work quietly and to earn their own living" (2 Thessalonians 3:12).

Watch for brothers who need courage for godly action. Then be quick to commend those who act. Encourage those who share their faith courageously. Encourage other men to live righteous and holy lives in a crooked, depraved generation — even when the workplace opposes us. Let men know that God will honor them for standing up for Christ.

As an example from my ministry, I often hear a young man express a desire to go to the mission field. If men like them are in your church, please don't needlessly discourage them from wanting to live out the Great Commission. Encourage them.

5. Seek to have the ministry of encouragement.

I once talked to a doctor about his friendships, and he told me, "My wife is my best friend, and I really don't need other friends." I think many men feel that way. But what about the ministry you might have if you develop friendships with other men with the intent to encourage?

> "I've learned it's hard to be encouraging and nearly impossible to be too encouraging."

We understand that joy comes to us when others encourage us, but we don't always think about how we gain joy when we encourage others. It's easy to tear down, to disparage, to be critical. It's hard to build up, spur others to godly action, and find the good in others. But to spur men to grow in Christ, they need to be encouraged. One of the gifts that Jesus uses to bring joy even in tribulations is the work of encouragement. Obviously, this best happens in

the context of a church. Men, make guy friends in your church. Start meeting with men you want to get to know better. Then be intentional in your encouragement.

I have lived decades as a Christian. I've learned it's hard to be encouraging and nearly impossible to be too encouraging. So be encouraged, in Christ, to encourage one another.