

11. Encouragement for the Journey



Wednesday, 15th July, 2020 – Glenda Bolitho

SERMON

“We All Need Encouragement”

2 COR 7:5–7



“⁵For when we came into Macedonia, this body of ours had no rest, but we were harassed at every turn—conflicts on the outside, fears within. ⁶But God, who comforts the downcast, comforted us by the coming of Titus, ⁷and not only by his coming but also by the comfort you had given him. He told us about your longing for me, your deep sorrow, your ardent concern for me, so that my joy was greater than ever.”

Bible Reading: **2 Corinthians 7:5-7**

Prayer:

Before I commence, let me pray.

*“May the words of my mouth and
the meditation of my heart,
be pleasing in Your sight.
O Lord, my Rock and my Redeemer.”
Amen*

Introduction

Today I want to share some thoughts with you about that very important quality or character trait of encouragement.

Everyone is a combination of strengths and weaknesses, good points and bad points. There is a sense in which we are all walking contradictions, because we often believe one thing and do another.

Take my case, for instance. In my speaking role here at St. Luke's, I have referred on a number of occasions to Paul's wonderful words of encouragement in Philippians 4 which say in part, *"Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God which transcends all understanding will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus."* I believe those words passionately, I keep them on our fridge, yet I sometimes struggle with anxiety.

Here in 2 Corinthians, Paul admits the same is true for him. The man who wrote Philippians 4 about the peace of God also wrote in 2 Corinthians, Chapter 7 about his own fears and phobias, saying, *"When we came into Macedonia, this body of ours had no rest, but we were harassed at every turn – conflicts on the outside, fears within."* (2 Cor 7:5 NIV). The fears Paul was referring to here, to set the reading in context, were not anxieties concerning his own safety, since nothing would have been more out of character for one who counted not his life dear to himself (Acts 20:24) and who looked forward to the time when he would be home with the Lord (2 Cor 5:8 Phil 1:21,23). His anxieties were concerning the spiritual well-being of his converts at Corinth, and these anxieties were exacerbated by the fact that he had expected to encounter Titus in Troas with news about his converts which he so urgently desired to hear.

Encouragement is One of our Greatest Needs (v 5)

Earlier in this letter of 2 Corinthians, in Chapter 2, Paul wrote: *“Now when I went to Troas to preach the Gospel of Christ and found that the Lord had opened a door for me, I still had no peace of mind, because I did not find my brother Titus there. So I said goodbye to them and went on to Macedonia”* (v 12 NIV). Corinth was Paul’s premier church in Europe, but there were divisions and conflict there, and false teachers and heretical doctrines. Titus had gone to manage the situation, but Paul was so worried he couldn’t even preach in Troas when a door opened to him. The Greek says *“My spirit had no relaxing.”* Winston Churchill defined worry as *“an emotional spasm that occurs when the mind catches hold of something and will not let it go.”* Not even Paul was immune from this, and here in Troas, he grew so upset and worried, he couldn’t even preach, so he went to Macedonia. Our text to-day picks up the story, *“When we came into Macedonia, this body of ours had no rest.”* (v. 5). He uses the same Greek word- “relaxing”. In chapter 2, his mind could not relax, and here in Chapter 7, his body could not relax. He continued, *“We were harassed at every turn..... conflicts on the outside, fears within.”* **Paul needed encouragement just like we do. We live in a world in which encouragement is one of our greatest needs.**

Encouragement is also one of God’s Greatest Provisions (v6)

The passage doesn’t stop with verse 5. Verse 6 in the New King James version opens with the words: *“Nevertheless God”*. What a memorable phrase! *“Nevertheless God, who comforts the downcast”*. **If you are downcast to-day, be encouraged, these words are for you**, just as they were for Paul all those centuries ago! But now, here is the question. How does God encourage and comfort us? I could say, “God comforts us with certain promises in his Word that meet our particular need. He comforts us through the act of worship. He comforts us through answered prayer and by workings of His personal providence.” And all of those ways are very real ways

in which God encourages and comforts us. But in this passage, God comforted Paul through a fellow believer, through the arrival of Titus. God imparted comfort through another human being who showed up with good news. Think of yourself as a fully commissioned dispenser of encouragement to others. It's amazing to think that we are providers of God's own encouragement to another person.

Encouragement has a Never-ending Pass-along Quality (v.7)

Furthermore, encouragement is the gift that keeps on giving. In this passage, the Corinthians, despite their problems, had somehow managed to encourage Titus, who had encouraged Paul, who wrote this epistle for us, and to-day we've been greatly encouraged by it. There's a ripple effect to our simple acts of encouragement that continues until Christ returns.

In his book, "The Fine Art of Friendship", Ted Engstrom tells of a literary group that formed years ago at the University of Wisconsin, USA. This group was made up of gifted young men wanting to be writers. They met together to read and critique each other's work. They called themselves The Stranglers, and they tended to be hard on each other. They dissected the minutest literary expressions, and their sessions became critical as they surveyed each other's work. A group of women at the same university, not to be outdone, formed a group called The Wranglers. They, too, read their work to one another, but there was a difference. Their criticism was softer, more positive, more encouraging, and sometimes there was no criticism at all! Twenty years passed, and someone did an exhaustive study of the two groups. For all their determined potential, not one of The Stranglers had made a significant literary accomplishment of any kind. But from The Wranglers had come six or more successful authors, including Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings who wrote *The Yearling*.

I share that little story with you as a good example of the positive effects of encouragement.

Vincent van Gogh. However, conversely, I also came across this sad little account of the life of famous artist, Vincent van Gogh. Perhaps, like me, you studied him in Art classes at school. I couldn't put my hands on my old art text book last night, so my memory is hazy. I know I loved his painting of a cane chair and sunflowers. But we didn't learn much about his personal life, except the story of his severed ear. It wasn't until I read this article that I realised how very sad his life had been, due in part to lack of encouragement. It was a salutary reminder of how important lovingly given encouragement is in God's grand scheme of things. Let me share this article with you: -

As a boy, Vincent van Gogh wrote: *"I feel instinctively that I am good for something, that there is some point to my existence....What could I be? What service could I perform?"* Growing up, he searched for purpose in life. As a young man, he moved to Paris and became friends with a young Englishman with whom he studied the Bible. He began working in a little church and occasionally taught the Bible and gave sermons. He wrote in one letter: *"Woe is me if I do not preach the Gospel; if I do not aim at that and possess hope and faith in Christ, it would be bad for me indeed.....It is a delightful thought that in the future, wherever I go, I shall preach the Gospel."* Vincent, however, failed to get into theological school. In 1879, he was assigned to preaching the Gospel among poverty-stricken miners in Belgium. He had no one to encourage him. The church authorities issued a report saying that while he aided the sick and wounded, his ability to preach was lacking. As a result, he was dismissed. Vincent packed his things and plodded down the road in bare feet, head bent, carrying his few possessions on his shoulders. The children shouted after him, *"He's mad! He's Mad!"*

Vincent gave up on the ministry, turned away from the Lord, and decided to become an artist. Even there, he had no one to encourage

him except his brother. During his entire lifetime, he sold only one painting. He became increasingly unstable and unhappy. During the final seventy days of his life he painted seventy paintings. He was in a frenzy, losing touch with reality. One can't help wondering what would have happened in those early days of his ministry if he had just been given some encouragement.

Conclusion

We all need encouragement, and God is the God of all comfort. He uses us to encourage one another, and those simple acts and words of encouragement have a flow on effect that outlive us all.

Amen

Map of the Region



Reference Material:

Nelson's Annual Preacher's Sourcebook - 2009 Edition
The New International Commentary on the New Testament
The Second Epistle to the Corinthians – Philip Edgcumbe Hughes