

INTRODUCTION

This is the eighth message in the series "Finding Hope in a Hopeless World." This message is entitled "The Courage to Encourage."

In 1872 Daniel Kelley was living in Kansas and wrote the words to the song, "Home on the Range." It is the official song of Kansas. I like the part that says, "Home, home on the range. Where the deer and the antelope play (and in the late 1800s there were millions of antelope in Kansas, today there are less than 1,000)." But my favorite part is the next line: "Where seldom in heard a discouraging word." Wouldn't we all like to live where we seldom hear a discouraging word? But the truth is that many of the words we hear are demeaning and discouraging.

Some people are so negative they only see problems. A duck hunter bought a new dog. He took the dog out for the first time, and when he shot the duck, the dog ran across the top of the water and retrieved the duck. The hunter thought that was amazing. So the next day he took his hunting buddy, who was always negative and complaining. He shot a duck and his dog ran on the top of the water and retrieved the duck. He turned to his friend and asked, "Did you notice anything strange about my dog?" The negative guy said, "I sure did. He can't swim worth a lick!"

It seems like everywhere we turn we hear discouraging words. It takes a lot of knowledge and skill to build a house, but it doesn't take much skill to tear one down. In the same way, it's easier to tear people down than to build them up.

Are you an encourager? When you are around people can they say of you, "Where seldom is heard a discouraging word?" It takes courage to encourage. Paul was an encourager. Let's read his words to his friends in Thessalonica.

1 Thessalonians 3:1-10. "So when we could stand it no longer, we thought it best to be left by ourselves in Athens. We sent Timothy, who is our brother and God's fellow worker in spreading the gospel of Christ, to strengthen and encourage you in your faith, so that no one would be unsettled by these trials. You know quite well that we were destined for them. In fact, when we were with you, we kept telling you that we would be persecuted. And it turned out that way, as you well know. For this reason, when I could stand it no longer, I sent to find out about your faith. I was afraid that in some way the tempter might have tempted you and our efforts might have been useless. But Timothy has just now come to us from you and has brought good news about your faith and love. He has told us that you always have pleasant memories of us and that you long to see us, just as we also long to see you. Therefore, brothers, in all our distress and persecution we were encouraged about you because of your faith. For now we really live, since you are standing firm in the Lord. How can we thank God enough for you in return for all the joy we have in the presence of our God because of you? Night and day we pray most earnestly that we may see you again and supply what is lacking in your faith."

The word "encourage" means to impart courage to someone. What oxygen is to the body, encouragement is to the soul. Here's a trivia question: What character in the New Testament was known more by his nickname than his real name? Give up? It was Barnabas. His real name was

Joseph. "Barnabas" means "son of encouragement." When Paul first met the Lord, the disciples in Jerusalem were skeptical of his conversion. After all, Paul had been persecuting Christians and arresting them. But it was Barnabas who took Paul to them and encouraged them to accept him as a brother.

What would be your nickname if people called you by your attitude and actions? Would you be called "Encourager" or "Helper" or "Teacher" or "Servant" or "Kindness?" Or would you be called "Lazy?" "Grumpy?" "Stingy?" "Gossiper?" "Tardy?" or "Critical?"

People gravitate toward encouragers. William Arthur Ward wrote: "Flatter me, and I may not believe you. Criticize me, and I may not like you. Ignore me, and I may not forgive you. Encourage me, and I will not forget you."

Mary Kay Ash wasn't in the cosmetics business; she was in the people business. She was a committed Christian who generously gave to First Baptist Dallas and Prestonwood. She wrote: "Pretend that every single person you meet has a sign around his or her neck that says, 'Make Me Feel Important.' Not only will you succeed in sales, you will succeed in life."

It takes courage to encourage. In this passage we see three statements that Paul made to these struggling believers. These were encouraging words. And you can speak these same encouraging words to people in your circle of relationships.

I. "YOU MAY BE STRUGGLING WITH TRIALS, BUT DON'T GIVE UP"

Paul knew these believers were facing trials. He wrote in verses 2-3: "...to strengthen and encourage you in your faith, so that no one would be unsettled by these trials."

The Greek word for encourage is *parakaleo*, which means to come alongside someone and speak to them. It's the same word Jesus used to describe the Holy Spirit.

Life is full of trials and tribulations. Christians aren't exempt from trouble. In fact, Paul had predicted these believers would be persecuted. When people go through tough times, God wants us to come alongside them to encourage them.

One of the most frustrating experiences is to get in your car and it won't start. You turn the key and nothing happens, or it makes that clicking noise. It's happened to most of us. Your battery is dead. Maybe you've called a friend or family member to come "jump you off." They drive up and you take jumper cables and connect red-to-red and black-to-black. If all goes well, you get in your car and your engine will start. That friend or family member has energy in their battery and they are sharing it with you so that you can get started. That's what encouragement is. It's when you use words like emotional jumper cables to give energy and strength to someone whose battery is dead.

Jackie Robinson was the first African-American to play major league baseball. You might have seen his story in the recent movie, "42." At almost every stadium he had to endure racial slurs and name-calling. The movie portrays a true scene from Jackie's first season. The Brooklyn

Dodgers were playing in Cincinnati. A ground ball was hit to Jackie Robinson and he missed it for an error. The fans intensified their yelling and jeering. He hung his head in shame and later said he considered the leaving the field and leaving baseball that day. But the shortstop for the Dodgers, Pee Wee Reese, came over from his position. He stood beside Jackie Robinson and then put his arm around Jackie's shoulder. Pee Wee Reese was one of the most respected ball players in the country. As he stood there with his arm around Jackie's shoulder, the fans grew quiet. Later, Jackie Robinson said that arm around his shoulder saved his career. If you ever go to Brooklyn, be sure to visit the baseball stadium of the minor league team, the Brooklyn Cyclones, because there's a statue outside commemorating that act of encouragement.

Paul wrote that he was concerned the tempter would influence the believers in Thessalonica. We learned in the last message that the devil wants to try to stop you. He wants for you to give up and give in when things get tough.

Perhaps you're listening to me right now and you're going through a very difficult time. And maybe nobody knows the trouble you've seen. But you're struggling and you're getting tired. I want to encourage you today with a quote from Winston Churchill. He spoke these words during some of the most difficult days of World War II: "Never give in—never, never, never, in nothing great or small, large or petty. Never yield to force; never yield to the apparently overwhelming might of the enemy."

But have some more words of encouragement from someone much more important than Winston Churchill. Jesus said: "In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world." (John 16:33)

Will you have the courage to encourage? Will you ask the Holy Spirit to bring to your mind someone who is struggling right now? They need to be encouraged. Will you make a commitment to come alongside them? Maybe you can put a hand on their shoulder. Or call or write them and say, "I know you're going through a tough time, but I care for you. And I want to encourage you to hang in there."

II. "YOU MAY FEEL ISOLATED, BUT I'M THANKFUL FOR YOU"

One of the best ways to encourage someone is to tell him or her you are thankful for them. Paul modeled this encouragement when he wrote in verse 9: "How can we thank God enough for you in return for all the joy we have in the presence of our God because of you?"

Sometimes people feel alone and unappreciated. You can encourage them by just thanking them. I was served at a fast-food restaurant a few weeks ago. The girl at the register was pleasant and had a big smile on her face as she took my order and gave it to me. I could tell that she was going out of her way to be friendly. When I got my order I said, "I want to thank you for being so pleasant and cheerful. Your smile is beautiful. I'll bet people tell you that all the time."

Her smile faded for a minute and she said, "No. In fact you're the first person who has mentioned it." But then her smile returned and she said, "Thanks for noticing."

People need us to tell them we're thankful for them. I came up with a list of seven ways you can express gratitude to someone. (1) Share a specific example of something they did for you and how it made a difference in your life. (2) Do something little but thoughtful for them, like cleaning up the dishes after a meal or the take-out cartons. (3) Offer to do something you know they don't enjoy doing like organizing their closet or mowing their lawn. (4) Tell them you are available if they have anything they need to talk about. (5) Give them a small gift that you think they would enjoy, and let them know specifically why you want them to have it. (6) Compliment them on a talent, skill, or strength that you admire. (7) Give them a long, friendly hug; or if they don't like hugs, give them a firm handshake and look them in the eye and say, "You make the world a better place."

It's a good thing to express thanks to people when good things happen. And I want to take this opportunity to publically express my thanks Pastor Tom Buck in Lindale and to all the teachers, parents, and students who went ahead with the program "IN GOD WE TRUST" last Wednesday evening.

When the Freedom From Religion Foundation in Wisconsin threatened a lawsuit against the Lindale School System, Pastor Buck and First Baptist Church stepped in and rented the high school auditorium. So instead of a couple of hundred of parents watching the program, there were over 2,000 people who watched these Fifth Graders present the truth about the founding of America. We have always been a nation whose motto is "In God We Trust."

I want to encourage every concerned Christian to be active and involved to resist the growing efforts to restrict our religious freedom. And I have one bit of advice for the Cheeseheads up in Wisconsin who call themselves the Freedom from Religion Foundation: Don't Mess with Texas.

Now, here's your next assignment. Ask the Holy Spirit to bring to your mind someone you need to tell that you're thankful for him or her. If they're here, you have my permission to text them right now and just say, "I'm thankful for you." Or tell them personally after the service. Or write or call them. There is someone out there who may feel isolated and unappreciated, and they need to be encouraged.

III. "YOU MAY FEEL WEAK, BUT I'M PRAYING FOR YOU"

Not only did Paul tell them not to give up during their trials, and that he was thankful for them. He also encouraged them by telling them he was praying for them. He wrote in verse 10: "Night and day we pray most earnestly that we may see you again and supply what is lacking in your faith."

When we pray for others, it's called intercessory prayer. Do you pray for other people? Or do you find yourself just praying for your own needs, or the needs of your own family? Too many of our prayers are what I call "Polly-want-a-cracker prayers." We spend all our prayer time asking God to give stuff to us. Are you like the man who prayed, "Lord, bless me and my wife, Dora, our two kids; Us four, no more."

Paul not only told them he was praying for them, he even wrote out the content of the prayer he was making on their behalf. It's a great prayer and it's one you can pray for others. "Now may our God and Father himself and our Lord Jesus clear the way for us to come to you. May the Lord make your love increase and overflow for each other and for everyone else, just as ours does for you. May he strengthen your hearts so that you will be blameless and holy in the presence of our God and Father when our Lord Jesus comes with all his holy ones." (1 Thessalonians 3:11-13)

You can be a real source of encouragement to someone if you tell them you're praying the same thing for them that Paul prayed. Notice the three things he asked God to do.

A. I'm asking the Lord to fill you with His love

The mark of a true disciple isn't a big Bible or a cross around the neck. Jesus said the world would recognize His disciples by our love. Remember, these Christians were being persecuted. Paul was praying that they would love their enemies as much as they would love one another.

B. I'm asking the Lord to strengthen your heart

In the struggles of life we sometimes get weak and weary. We aren't so much physically tired as we are emotionally drained. That's why it's important for us to pray for God to strengthen the hearts of people who are hurting.

C. I'm asking the Lord to make you ready for His return

The theme of this letter is the return of Jesus. The most vivid description of the return of Christ in the Bible is in the next chapter. Paul expected Jesus to return in his lifetime. So should we. Paul called the time he lived "the last days." If those were the last days, we must surely be living in the last of the last days. But remember, with the Lord, a day is like a thousand years and a thousand years is like a day.

Are you ready for the return of Jesus? We should pray for one another.

Many of you have met Pastor Emmy from Uganda. He is a perhaps the most powerful prayer warrior I have ever met. I am humbled by his simple, but powerful faith.

Last Wednesday, our daughter Jenni and her husband, Jason, and our three grandkids were on their way to Fort Worth. Jason was driving on I-20 just past Dallas when they ran into a terrible rainstorm. The car started hydroplaning and Jason lost control. He crashed into the wall in the median and the car spun around facing the oncoming traffic. The car was totaled, but none of them were hurt beyond a few bruises and abrasions.

I'm thankful for whoever came up with the idea of placing those barriers in the medians. But here's my point about prayer.

The next day I got an email from Pastor Emmy in Uganda. He wrote me: "Beloved Pastor, I have woke up at 3:02 a.m. and you and your family are strongly on my heart. Let me hope that all is fine with you. Love you in Jesus name. Emmy."

At the time I didn't make the connection. But the next day I started comparing the time zones. Kampala is eight hours ahead of Texas. When it was 3:02 a.m. in Uganda, it was 7:02 p.m. in Texas. And here's the text I got from Jenni with the time stamp of 7:02 "PRAY: JUST WRECKED. JUST TOTALLED CAR BUT I THINK WE'RE ALL OK."

You may think that's coincidence, but I don't. Just as I believe God has some angels there taking care of my family, I believe God quickened the heart of one of his most powerful prayer warriors to intercede on our behalf.

Can you imagine how encouraged I was to learn Pastor Emmy was praying for us? But I wouldn't have been encouraged if he hadn't taken the time to write me and say, "I'm praying for you."

CONCLUSION

Do you have the courage to encourage? You may be thinking, "I need someone to encourage ME!" Last year when Cindy and I were in Australia, we got to see a boomerang demonstration put on by Aborigines. They were experts. They would fling the crooked stick and it would go spinning out fifty yards, and then come circling right back to them. I could see how they could hunt with them. Did you hear about the Australian who got a new boomerang? The only trouble is that he couldn't throw away his old one.

Encouragement is like a boomerang; it always comes back. So find someone who needs encouragement and let it fly. And then get ready to catch it, because it will come back to you. If you want to BE encouraged, then you must BE an encourager. In Luke 6:38 Jesus said, "Give, and it will be given to you...for with the measure you use, it will be measured to you." That applies to gratitude and encouragement and prayer. The more encouragement you give, the more you'll receive.

I want you to leave church today committed to be an encourager. Sometimes all people need is a single word of encouragement. James Robinson has been a Christian television personality for many years. But in the early 1970s he was an evangelist who traveled around having stadium crusades like Billy Graham. When I was a student at Samford University, he was preaching at a high school football stadium in Decatur, Alabama. Some of my friends and I went to hear him. One side of the stadium was full, and there was a platform and a crusade choir facing the stands. That night James Robinson preached a great message on salvation. Then he extended a Billy Graham-type invitation asking people who wanted to be saved to come to the front of the platform. As the choir sang, "Just As I Am" there were counselors moving forward along with dozens of people who wanted to accept Christ.

I was standing there praying with my friends. The row behind us was filled with the about 20 football players from Hartselle High School. They all had their letter jackets on. During the

invitation, it was obvious that many, if not all, of those young men were under conviction. But since they were there with their tough buddies, nobody wanted to make a move to walk forward.

The invitation was winding down and none of them had taken a step toward the field. So I just turned around and said, "Don't you guys want to go to Jesus? Come on, I'll go with you." That was all it took, because every one of those football players followed me down the field and I gave them off to the counselors. That's all it took, just a single word of encouragement.

And I want to give that same word of encouragement to you. "Don't you want to come to Jesus?" His arms are wide open and He wants to welcome you into His family.

There is great power in encouragement. I encourage you to have the courage to encourage!

OUTLINE

I. "YOU MAY BE STRUGGLING WITH TRIALS, BUT DON'T GIVE UP"

II. "YOU MAY FEEL ISOLATED, BUT I'M THANKFUL FOR YOU"

III. "YOU MAY FEEL WEAK, BUT I'M PRAYING FOR YOU"

- A. I'm asking the Lord to fill you with His love
- B. I'm asking the Lord to strengthen your heart
- C. I'm asking the Lord to make you ready for His return

— MESSAGE DISCLAIMER —

These messages are offered for your personal edification and enrichment. There is no legal copyright on this material. I have used many sources, and I have always attempted to cite any exact quotations. Any failure to cite a quote is simply an oversight on my part.

If you are a preacher or teacher, I encourage you to use this material to stimulate your own Spirit-driven imagination. Additional study beyond this material will benefit both you and your listeners. You have my full permission to use any of this material as long as you cite the source for any substantial amount used in your message.



David O. Dykes, Pastor
Green Acres Baptist Church
Tyler, Texas

If you borrow the majority of a message or outline, I encourage you to simply preface your remarks by saying something like: ***“Some (or “much” as the case may be) of the ideas I’m sharing in this message came from a message by Pastor David Dykes in Texas.”*** This simple citation may prevent any criticism that may be directed toward you.

To put it in Texas terms, “You’re mighty welcome to use any and all of my ingredients; just make your own chili!”

For the Joy...
Pastor David Dykes