

Christian Encouragement

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[0 : 00] Well, please turn back to First Estilonia's chapter 3, that's the chapter we're going to be focusing on tonight. Now, the sort of general theme of tonight's study is encouragement, Christian encouragement.

I feel this is a book and a chapter in particular which is brimming over with encouragement and there's a lot of things that we can draw out of that and learn from it. I want to start tonight just with a wee illustration and forgive me, it's a personal illustration.

But this week, I have the joy and the privilege of decorating my flat. It's in bad need of a coat of paint. So I've got a whole lot of different jobs that I've got to do.

Now some of them are easy and some of them are kind of hard. And the hard ones are things like trying to hang lining paper. Hanging lining paper on quite a tall sort of nine foot ceiling is no easy feat for somebody like me.

And so, rather than get wallpaper pasted and paper all over the place, I require some help. So my very helpful brother-in-law, Ross, has been helping me.

[1 : 02] So yesterday we spent a lot of time up a ladder pasting the walls and putting lining paper up because that was a job that I could well have made a mess of. And I needed some help and a wee bit of encouragement as well.

Now, I mention that because if it's true that in something like decorating, I need help, it's also true that in different areas of our lives, you know this from your work, or just different things that you go through in life, whether it's something trivial like decorating or something like a relationship, we need help sometimes with the things that are difficult and we need encouragement as well.

We need somebody to come alongside us and to give us a bit of support. Now if it's true of things like that in life in general, why is it that we sometimes can think that we can go through the Christian life without needing any encouragement or without needing any help?

And why is it that we sometimes think that really we don't need to give any encouragement because surely everybody's fine, everybody's really sorted? I think that's a great fallacy.

It's something that is a bit of a danger for us because the truth, if we think about it, maybe the truth that you're very keenly aware of tonight because you're really feeling it is that sometimes we really need to receive encouragement in our Christian walk and we also should be challenged to think about how we can give encouragement.

[2 : 28] Now that is the theme, one of the themes at least that comes springing out of this chapter. Like I said, I love reading First Thessalonians. I think it's a really encouraging book and Paul is writing to the Thessalonians particularly to encourage them and to support them because he knows they need it.

So I want to look through the chapter and to pull out some of the reasons that he supports them and encourages them, some of the ways in which he does it and some of the ways in which I think we should be challenged to think about our own attitude to spiritual, to Christian encouragement tonight.

So encouraging each other in our Christian walk. First thing we need to ask though is why is Paul so concerned? What's his particular concern that means that he feels a particular need to give encouragement to these believers?

We see that he says, if you look into chapter three and we'll read from the start of the chapter there, you get a real sense of tension as we jump into chapter three.

When we could stand it no longer, we thought it best to be left ourselves. He sent Timothy and then it goes on into verse three so that no one would be unsettled by these trials.

[3 : 44] So there's obviously some pretty hard hitting trials that the believers are going through. Now if you remember back to Acts chapter 17, when Paul came with the message to the people and we read of some people accepting it, some of the Jews and quite a large number of the Gentiles and it says the prominent woman, what happened?

You remember what happened? I guess it's not like nowadays in Edinburgh. A lot of people in Edinburgh are pretty indifferent to the Gospel. But the people in the community that they were in started a riot because the Gospel and the change in their lives that they went through, it was such a change and it was so offensive to them that they objected to it and they got together, a big gang, and they went and kind of got the Christians and they caused trouble and they started a riot. Now that would be terrifying. I don't know how you would feel about that but I think if somebody came banging at my door starting out a riot because of my faith, it would be pretty intimidating and I would probably class that as a trial.

So remember that these Christians had been converted not from a Christian background. It wasn't like they had a generally Christian upbringing and then they kind of, they'd affirmed their faith. But their background would have been, generally speaking, a kind of pagan background. So they had a totally different upbringing and they're converted into this faith in Jesus.

[5 : 15] They believe now in Jesus and that's a life-changing thing and it's a threatening thing to the culture in which they live. Now Paul has had to leave them, remember that he says that we were torn away from you in chapter 2 verse 17.

He had to leave suddenly. Now because he was so involved in their church, the start-up of their church, because he had to leave so suddenly, he's worried about them.

He cares for them. It's a really beautiful theme that comes through over and over again is that he isn't complacent about these people.

It's not like he went in as a missionary into this city and saw some people converted and kind of ticked a box like, ah, good, some people have become Christians. I'll just move on now and hopefully they'll be okay.

He really cares about them. He really cares about their spiritual good and he says, you know, when I could stand it no longer. So he's got a real worry for them because he's worried that their faith will be stretched and it will be torn and maybe torn apart.

[6 : 23] He's maybe concerned that they'll revert back to their own beliefs. So Paul's concerned about them but Paul has a plan. He doesn't do nothing. He doesn't just worry about them.

What does he do? He sends Timothy. Now he sends Timothy into a context of trials and it's clear from the Bible that this is something that shouldn't, Paul has to teach them and it's something that we maybe need to learn as well, isn't it?

That trials are something that we will go through. Whenever to think as Christians, I've become a Christian. Why is my life hard? Surely everything should be easy.

If God loves me, why are there difficult things in my life? Because the New Testament doesn't promise us that. It doesn't promise that Christianity comes and smooths over all the rough parts of life.

You get a real sense of that. Let me just read a verse. I'll just turn briefly to this verse in 1 Peter. Peter says, as he's writing to a different Christian audience, in chapter 4 verse 12, dear friends, do not be surprised at the painful trial you're suffering as though something strange were happening to you but rejoice that you participate in the sufferings of Christ.

[7 : 37] And again, in chapter 5 verse 10, the same kind of theme. He's just been warning them. In 1 Peter, he says over and over again, be self-controlled and alert.

But after he says that in verse 8, he says, I'm the God of all grace who called you to his eternal glory in Christ after you've suffered a little while, will himself restore you and make you strong. So there's a kind of running through the New Testament, a realistic sense that sometimes life will be hard and sometimes because of our faith, we'll be tested and people will ask questions of us. And it will really ask us to depend on the Lord. And the purpose of our trials as we see them in the light of the Gospel is to help us to rely on the Lord and to remind us that we don't rely on our own strength.

So there's the reality of trials. And this is what these folk in this church are facing. And so Paul says, I'm going to send Timothy to you to encourage you because I care about you.

[8 : 42] So we see that. Verse 2, 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, not to just sort out all their problems and make them go away, to strengthen them and encourage them in their faith.

He really wants to encourage them. Now, we learned something about Timothy and it can lead us into thinking that, well, sometimes we might think, well, some people have a particular gift for being an encourager.

Now, that's true. Some people, even in this congregation, we know of as real encouragers and maybe you know somebody in your life who's encouraged you and maybe it's a gift that you have. And it is true that some people have a particular gift for encouragement. And I think it's maybe something that we could say of Timothy. If you just turn to Philippians, there's a really great verse in Philippians that says something about Timothy.

Now Paul's writing to again, a different church community. And this tells us quite a lot about Timothy. Look at chapter 2, verse 19. He says to them, I hope in the Lord Jesus to send Timothy to you soon, that I also may be cheered when I receive news about you.

[10 : 02] I have no one else like him who takes a genuine interest in your welfare. For everyone looks out for his own interests, not those of Jesus Christ. But you know that Timothy has proved himself because as a son with his father, he served with me in the work of the Gospel.

So Timothy is somebody who also really cares about the spiritual life of the people that they were ministering amongst. You know, it really mattered to him, the people that they knew and that they'd met and that they'd ministered to, he really cared how they were doing spiritually.

And so he was somebody who could be sent as an encourager to build them up. Not just to say nice things to them, but to build them up in their faith. And so Paul sends Timothy to them to build them up and to encourage them.

He is somebody who's a good example to us. But I think it's wrong for us if we say, yeah, some people have a gift of encouragement and kind of leave it there.

Because surely none of us, if we're believers, can say, well, it's really not for me to encourage. I'm not an encourager. Some people might have a gift of encouragement.

[11 : 12] But as we'll go on to see, being an encourager doesn't just depend upon being a kind of a sort of generally happy person. It's not about being somebody who's just kind of bouncy and fun and who can come alongside somebody and kind of perk them up a bit and encourage them that way.

That's not really what we're talking about here. What we're talking about here, as we think about Paul, as we'll think about him a wee bit more in just a minute, and as we think about what Timothy's like, Paul says that Timothy's an encourager not because he's got a happy, bubbly personality, but because of his deep concern for their spiritual good and because of how rooted he is in the Gospel and of how central that is to who he is.

And so it shapes how he thinks about people. It shapes the way he thinks about people and he wants to interact with them because he wants to build them up.

And so that should speak to every one of us tonight. It should speak to me. It's something that really challenges me when I think about that. Am I somebody who genuinely thinks about other people, people in this congregation, the people that I come up in contact with in my life, do I think about them in terms of their spiritual good and their faith and how they're getting on with the Lord?

So there's a challenge for us to think about. So Paul sent encouragement. Next thing we see is that Paul received encouragement.

[12 : 36] As well as sending Timothy to build them up because he was concerned about them, you see the effect that it has on Paul. Look at chapter 3, verse 6. Now, Paul says to them in the letter that he's received news from Timothy.

This is what makes him so encouraged that Timothy comes back to him and he says they're getting on well. Look at the way that it makes Paul right.

Timothy has just now come to us from you and has brought good news about your faith and love. He's 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.

Your brothers in all our distress and persecution, we were encouraged about you because of your faith. And then look at this verse. This verse jumps out a mile for me.

For now we really live since you are standing firm in the Lord. Look at the focus of that verse. He's saying here is this is really what, as it were, made his day.

[13:40] This is what sets his heart on fire. Now we really live. Why? Because you're standing firm in the Lord. So it shows us really something about Paul.

Again it reinforces to us the fact that he wasn't just a tick box missionary. He didn't just go around preaching to big crowds, maybe stirring up some opposition and then just moving on and kind of forgetting about the people that he'd been amongst.

He had a wide ranging ministry. He had so many challenges in his life and he could be somebody who, as it were, batting down the hatches because of all the opposition he faced.

The amount of pressure that he faced, the amount of hatred that he faced for the Gospel. But whatever he went, he cared for the people that he'd been ministering to and he wanted to build them up and he wanted to encourage them.

We know about Paul because he says elsewhere, we see the character of Paul and we start to understand how it is that he can be an encourager like this because we understand how firmly rooted in the Gospel he is and how much has changed his life.

[14:50] Because he's able to say elsewhere, when he's talking about his life he says, for me to live as Christ and to die as gain. You see the whole purpose of Paul's life was for Christ.

All that he wanted to do for people was to help them to know Christ and if he died it would be even better because he would get to go to be with Christ.

That tells us so much about Paul. It tells us that he's able to be an encourager because he knew the Gospel and because he was somebody who didn't just have a sort of low level appreciation of the Lord working in his life.

It wasn't just like he'd had a kind of a sense of believing in God that didn't really touch him, didn't really change his heart or was maybe a kind of academic way of thinking about God and that's a danger that we can fall into, isn't it?

Sometimes we can kind of know about God. I know these things about God but I don't know Jesus as my savior. I haven't been changed by him. I don't know his forgiveness.

[15:56] Paul really, really knew God's forgiveness and it set him free and it changed his life and it changed his heart and so because of that, that feeds into the person he is here and the way that he responds to these people and the way that he cares for them.

It's why he can say for me to live as Christ and to die as God and it's why he can say for now we really live since you're standing firm in the Lord because all that he was about was encouraging others to know the Lord's forgiveness and freeing and life following Jesus.

So Paul sent encouragement and he received encouragement. So it's important also for us to think about sending encouragement and to challenge ourselves to think am I kind of blocking myself off to receiving encouragement?

Am I slipping into the mindset of thinking that I can just really get by by myself? Because if we're honest sometimes it can be the hardest thing to open up to somebody else especially spiritually, can't it?

It can be difficult for us to say to somebody, I'm really, I'm struggling at the moment. Could you pray for me? But I think it's vital. We've got to be honest with each other because we're here to support each other and we have a model for that, an example in these words that we get here.

[17:20] And it's also a challenge to think how do we think about each other as believers, as a community? St. Columbus people or if you're from a visiting church, the people that are in your church, do we think about each other in terms of spiritual welfare?

It is easy for us to think about other people in church because it can become like just a social circle and we can just think about people in terms of what's going on, who's doing what, who annoyed me, who did this, that and the next thing.

But if that's where we stop then we're really missing out because we have the privilege of praying for each other and of persevering with each other and of calling each other to accountability and of speaking the gospel to each other, to encourage each other.

That's what we're called to do. And the final thing I want to look at, I haven't seen the way that Paul receives encouragement himself, is just to ask the question as we sort of apply it and bring it a bit more closer to home.

Because you might be struggling in your faith and because it's not always easy and because sometimes, and can I say this particularly if you're, I hate saying age limits, but maybe sort of between the 16 to 22 age bracket, I remember when I was about that age group, if somebody came to me and said, how's your faith?

[18 : 39] Actually, hardly anybody ever did that to me, but if anybody ever did, it terrified me because I wasn't used to it. It just wasn't used to it and it was kind of embarrassing.

But we need to think about these things and it's good to develop and to pray through and really encourage each other and have a culture of encouraging each other. Because often, if we're honest, it can be hard enough to love God and to know the love of God and to encourage each other in the Gospel, let alone encouraging each other in our faith.

Sometimes the last thing we want to do is encourage each other or pray for one another or go to somebody who you maybe find difficult and build them up and help them in their faith and pray with them.

So how can we be encouragers? Finally, how can it be that sometimes we, with all our troubles, with all the things that go on in our lives, with all the ways in which peer pressure or fear can stop us being encouragers, how can we be encouragers?

Because we can struggle also with being just interested in our own selves and just thinking about ourselves. Well Paul directs them to something at the end of his chapter, which he knows will help them, which he knows will be vital for them.

[20 : 01] And it's important to read it and to notice it before we finish. So look at verse 12, please. Now we're reading from verse 11.

He's kind of concluding the chapter, so Paul says, 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'll be blameless and holy in the presence of our God and Father when our Lord Jesus comes with all his holy ones.

This is a specific petition or prayer that Paul makes for them. And what he says is, I pray for you that God would, what does he say in verse 12, make your love increase and overflow for each other and not just for each other, we see what he says in the rest of that verse and for everyone else. He prays that the Lord would give them loving hearts, that in their community as believers, their love for each other would just overflow out of a sense of having been loved so much by God that they in turn want to, that their love for each other just overflows and for the people who surround them so that they don't just become a holy huddle and care only for themselves, but that their attitude towards the people who surround them is love.

[21 : 29] And their attitude towards the people is that they want the gospel to go out to these people also and that they want others to come in and to know the love.

And so a key thing for us to do as we kind of process a chapter like this is to come before God and say, Lord, help me because often I struggle to care, often I struggle to love, often I struggle to break the barrier, talking to my friends about my faith.

It's too embarrassing. I don't know how to do it. Help me to do it. Help me to really want to do it because I love them so much. And I don't love them just in that kind of way with them, I have fun with them and life is just a bundle of laughs, but I love them in the gospel and I want them to know Jesus and I want them to help me to know Jesus also.

I really want them to know Jesus. I read this great quote from a book and it kind of summarizes some of what is being said in this chapter.

One of the commentators says, he's talking about the church here in Thessalonica, how might the members of this relatively new church with deep needs of its own gain strength in the face of difficulties and challenges.

[22 : 44] Through serving others in love, Paul implies, which is advice that flies in the face of the narcissism and self-centeredness of much of contemporary culture.

Big word, narcissism. What he's saying is, rather than just retreat back into looking after number one when trouble hits like a riot, so rather than when you're surrounded by people at uni or at work or whatever who laugh at you for being a Christian, rather than when you feel spiritually low just retreating in on yourself to protect yourself, or rather than having the attitude of just kind of the life is all about us and what we can get from life.

What he's saying here is, what we need to do is have our hearts filled again by the Lord with a love for others. A heart is filled with a sense of how God has loved us so much.

He's been so generous in loving us, us, and saving us as Paul came to understand from death and from separation from God so that our love in turn overflows for others.

Our life really becomes about loving others and wanting to go out with the gospel. We need to ask the Lord to help us with that and to give us a heart of love. We need to know the love that the Lord has for us also, and so maybe that's a prayer that we need to make tonight.

[24 : 11] Lord help me to know how much you love me, not because I deserve it, not because I stand here with a tick list of all the amazing things I've done in life, but out of your generosity you sent your son to be my savior.

Help me to understand that so that my heart has changed and renewed and so that I want that love for others and so that I don't just look at other people in terms of what they'll give me, but what can I give to them and how can I build them up and how can I support them.

So the question I suppose as we finish, the question is how do we see the person sitting next to us tonight? How do we think about the people who are in our city groups?

Do we really love them enough to pray for them? Do we really care for them spiritually and want to build them up? And are we going to go home tonight and think about that? Are we going to pray about it?

Are we going to ask the Lord to give us a burden so that we would share our burdens with each other and that we would care about the gospel alive amongst us and the spiritual lives of each other as a congregation.

[25 : 19] So pray that God would bless these thoughts to us tonight. Let's just bow our heads and pray. Lord, thank you that you've done so much for us.

Thank you that through nothing that we've done you poured out your love to us and we praise you for the way in which we see that at work in Paul's life. We praise you for the way in which he encouraged the Thessalonians and cared for them.

And Lord, help us to be challenged to be encouragers. But help us also to be challenged to be people who want spiritual good for each other and who want the gospel to be alive in each other's lives.

So impress these truths on us Lord. Help us to understand and to learn from your word and to live close to you, not far away from you. In Jesus' name, Amen.