

SUNDAY SCHOOL LESSONS
Commentary by Michael Sigler
June 20, 2010

Sustained Through Encouragement

1 Thessalonians 3

Key verse: “For this reason, brothers and sisters, during all our distress and persecution we have been encouraged about you through your faith” (1 Thessalonians 3:7).

Painter Benjamin West told a story from his life that demonstrates the tremendous power of *encouragement*. As a child, West loved to paint. One day while his mother was gone, he got out the oil paints and began to paint. Things didn't go well, however, and instead of a pretty picture he just made a terrible mess. He tried to get it all cleaned up before his mother returned, but she got back before Benjamin could finish the clean-up.

He says what his mother did next was a total surprise. She picked up his unfinished painting and said, “My, what a beautiful painting of your sister.” She gave him a kiss on the cheek and walked away. West said that, with that kiss, he became a painter.

In the apostle Paul's relationship with the Thessalonian church, we see the powerful influence of godly encouragement. Since Paul had to stay in Athens, he sent Timothy to Thessalonica “to strengthen and encourage” the believers there (v. 2). Paul's concern for the Thessalonian Christians was that “somehow the tempter had tempted you and that our labor had been in vain” (v. 5).

When Timothy returned from Thessalonica, he gave Paul the report that Paul describes as “the good news of your faith and love” (v. 6). The good news that the Thessalonian believers were standing firm in the Lord was such an encouragement to Paul that he says, “For this reason, brothers and sisters, during all our distress and persecution we have been encouraged about you through your faith. For we now live, if you continue to stand firm in the Lord” (vv. 7-9).

In this entire episode, encouragement plays a pivotal role. First, Timothy visits the believers in Thessalonica in order to encourage them in their faith. When Timothy returns to tell Paul of their faithfulness to Christ, Paul is greatly encouraged to learn that his ministry to the Thessalonians was not in vain, but was bearing fruit.

Still today, one of the most important things that believers can do is to encourage one another. Christian counselor and author, Larry Crabb, shared an experience that occurred in the church he attended as a young adult. In this church,

the young men were expected to participate in the communion services by praying out loud. Crabb (who had a problem with stuttering) felt the weight of this expectation, so he stood and began to pray. The prayer came out all wrong. Crabb remembers his stuttering prayer as “thanking the Father for hanging on the cross and praising Christ for triumphantly bringing the Spirit from the grave.”

When he finished that prayer, Crabb vowed he would never again speak or pray out loud in front of people. As soon as the service ended, Crabb rushed for the door. But before he could escape, an older man named Jim Dunbar caught Crabb. Crabb was expecting to receive a word of correction for his faulty theology. Instead, Jim Dunbar spoke these words: “Larry, there’s one thing I want you to know. Whatever you do for the Lord, I’m behind you one thousand percent.”

In his book, *Encouragement: The Key to Caring*, Larry Crabb wrote of that incident: “Even as I write these words, my eyes fill with tears. I have yet to tell that story to an audience without at least mildly choking up. Those words were life words. They had power. They reached deep into my being.”

Younger Christians, and those who are young in the faith, have a special need for such encouragement. It was this need that Paul wanted to meet when he sent Timothy to Thessalonica to encourage the believers there.

The need for encouragement is not limited, however, to the young or those who are new to the faith. William Wilberforce, a strong Christian in his day, had for years pushed Britain’s parliament to abolish slavery. At one point, Wilberforce was so discouraged in this fight that he was about to give up. At that same time, John Wesley, the founder of Methodism and a friend of Wilberforce, was on his death bed. But when Wesley learned about his friend’s discouragement, he asked that a pen and paper be brought to his bedside.

With weak and trembling hands, Wesley wrote: “Unless God has raised you up for this very thing, you will be worn out by the opposition of men and devils. But if God be for you, who can be against you? Are all of them stronger than God? Oh, be not weary of well-doing! Go on, in the name of God and in the power of His might, till even American slavery shall vanish away before it.”

Six days later, John Wesley died. But Wilberforce fought the battle against slavery for 45 more years. Finally, in 1833, three days before his own death, slavery was abolished in Britain. Even great Christians need encouragement!

Encouraging one another in the Lord is so important that the Bible indicates it is one of the main reasons why the church should gather regularly—not only to worship God but to encourage one another in the Lord: “And let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day approaching” (Hebrews 10:24-25).

In our life together, God wants us to do all that we can to encourage one another to *keep on keeping on* for the Lord.

William McElvaney told about an unusual incident that happened during the communion service in his church one Sunday. In this church, it was customary to pass the communion elements down the pew. As each person passed the elements to the person seated next to him, these words were to be offered: "This is the body and blood of Christ given for you."

On this communion Sunday, one man who was not very familiar with this custom handed the bread and wine to his neighbor, then forgot what he was supposed to say. After a painful pause, he blurted out these words: "Harvey—Hang in there!"

That may be the only time that "Harvey—Hang in there!" was part of a communion liturgy. But the truth is, when we gather as the Body of Christ, one of our goals should be to communicate to one another: "I know it's tough out there. I know sometimes you want to give up. But for God's sake, don't. Hang in there! Our Lord is able to bring you through to victory."

Be encouraged. Be an encourager.

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