

Coach House Church BEACONS

SEEKING OUT ENCOURAGEMENT

17TH AUGUST 2020

I wonder if you can relate to this experience. You get worried about something, perhaps something you did, or anticipating a stressful situation, and you keep mulling it over in your mind. It could be a presentation at work, or preparing a lesson for a subject you don't know well, or reflecting on an incident between you and a friend. The thinking escalates as you imagine the possible outcomes, or how the situation might play out when you actually come to confront it. The worry just gets worse. At some point, you just want the situation to conclude whether bad or good so that you can stop thinking about it!

Often the worst thing to do in this kind of situation is to mull it over by yourself. In the end, you subject yourself to whatever your imagination justifies. For some people, that means letting yourself off the hook very easily. For others, it means dying a thousand deaths because you think you've done something wrong. Of course, the objective facts of the situation will determine whether either point is true, or if the truth is somewhere in the middle. Also, thinking about an issue by yourself is important and necessary – but it's often good to get another opinion. However, when stressful reflection builds up and up and I talk about it to a friend who knows me well, it often changes my whole perspective on the event.

Someone on the outside of the situation, looking in, has a great vantage point for seeing things objectively. It is easy to rationalise things to myself, when my mind communes with itself. The things that I think are always amenable to me and my mind, because that's where those thoughts come from. Unless I am very disciplined, I am unlikely to think something totally unlike myself. My thoughts have their source in my own mind and my own heart. Another person brings their unique self, experiences and mind to bear upon the situation which is different to your own, and can help you to see things correctly. As believers, this is even more

true, as God is able to speak to us through other Christians – so letting others into our lives gives us the opportunity for correction and encouragement when we need it.

The reason I've brought up this situation is because I'm aware that many of us are in a position where we've still got limited contact with others, and still find ourselves in isolation. It's likely that we face some separation from friends, and with that, the healthy interaction that takes us outside of our own minds and into someone else's. The Bible has a lot to say about how we interact together, so in light of that, I want to read 2 passages.

The first is from Paul's letter to the Ephesians which shows how interconnected we are as Christians, who are united together by Jesus. This is Ephesians 4:15 – 16: "Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will grow to become in every respect the mature body of him who is the head, that is, Christ. 16 From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work."

We are a body. The body is a whole piece and every part is connected. It is the same with the church, where all believers are connected together by Jesus in unity. We don't function independently of one another and we each have something to contribute. Looking at verse 16, we see that we are meant to build each other up in love under the direction of Jesus. These verses help us to see that we are not meant to function like isolated or detached body parts! Rather, the norm is helping one another out in love.

The second verse is from Hebrews 10:24-25 and it emphasises the value of meeting together, and says this: "and let us consider how to stimulate one another to love and good deeds, not forsaking our own assembling together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another; and all the more as you see the day drawing near."

The emphasis is similar, but it gives us an important link between 'assembling together' and 'encouraging one another'.

Obviously we cannot meet or 'assemble' together in the ways we'd like to at the moment – out of love for one another's health and respecting the authorities. However, these passages affirm the fact that we should not be walking alone as Christians, completely detached from all sources of fellowship and connection with one another. My examples at the beginning of this beacon make more sense in light of the two passages I've read: if we're not speaking to each other, how can we be building one another up? If we're not 'meeting' in some format, how can we encourage one another? If we stay completely isolated, or don't bother to reach out to others, we leave ourselves open to discouragement and our views about

God open to distortion without the input of others. We should ask God and ourselves: 'Who could I reach out to build up in love?' Or 'should I be seeking more opportunities for fellowship (for my own good)?'

Also, 'building up' and 'encouraging one another' are both broad categories. It could look like offering practical help. It could simply be listening to what someone is going through. It could be texting someone a verse from the Bible. It could be saying encouraging words. It could be praying with someone. Whatever you say or do, it is a combination of words and actions, motivated by God's love, which helps another person grow in their faith and live for God – whatever situation they are facing. I emphasise this because it isn't just about reciting meaningless phrases like 'I'm sure it'll be fine!' but includes genuine care and investment in the person you are encouraging. Going back to the image of the body, your left leg would certainly be concerned if your right leg was dropping off!

However, despite this, and probably despite our best efforts, there are many of us right now who are more isolated than usual or stuck in environments which do us no good. Can God come through for us in those situations? Absolutely. God knows our situations, and what we can and cannot do.

Even when we're more separated from people than we'd like, we can still come to the Bible and hear God's words to us to encourage us when we find ourselves alone.

For example, I remind myself of James 1:17 which tells me that 'every good and perfect gift' comes from God. He is good to me and I can trust him. I remind myself of Psalm 46:1 (and similar verses) which tells me 'God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in times of trouble'. He will be my source of help when I need it. Or Proverbs 24:3 'Above all else, guard your heart, for everything you do flows from it.' For when sinful or negative thoughts start to invade my mind. These verses, and many others, have helped keep my mind on God when I've found myself in a lonely or isolated place

Wherever we can do so safely, let's meet up and encourage one another – whether it's over zoom, in a park or through a phone call. This will help us to see God clearly and evaluate our lives and struggles more clearly too.



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