

The Old Hickory Bulletin

Old Hickory Church of Christ

*841 Old Hickory Blvd.
Jackson, TN 38305*

October 21, 2012

Volume 32, # 43

Source of True Encouragement

Paul's letters to the church at Thessalonica were written in the midst of great concern among the brethren regarding death, the coming of Christ and the hope of those in Christ. When we read 1 Thessalonians 4, it is evident that some among their number had died while awaiting the promised hope at the Lord's coming.

Some wondered if the death of those saints separated them from that hope in Christ. No doubt, the thought of faithful brethren having been robbed of their hope by untimely death was discouraging and depressing to the saints.

When viewed in terms of the present reality of their severe persecution, the obvious concern existed as to the ability of evil men to take away their hope by killing them (1 Thessalonians 1:6). After all, martyrdom was a present fact in the first century (Acts 7:59-60; 12:1-2; et. al.). In the midst of affliction, the saints in Thessalonica needed strength and comfort to help them live with joy and hope. Where could they find the real, lasting and substantive encouragement they needed? What could be the source for such?

A Look at 1 Thessalonians 4

The end of the fourth chapter contains the answer to our question as well as a lesson concerning how we can be encouraged. Think about these words:

But we would not have you ignorant, brethren, concerning them that fall asleep; that ye sorrow not, even as the rest, who have no hope. For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so them also that are fallen asleep in Jesus will God bring with him. For this we say unto you by the word of the Lord, that we that are alive, that are left unto the coming of the Lord, shall in no wise precede them that are fallen asleep. For the Lord himself shall descend from heaven, with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trump of God: and the dead in Christ shall rise first; then we that are alive, that are left, shall together with them be caught up in the clouds, to meet the Lord in the air: and so shall we ever be with the Lord. Wherefore comfort one another with these words (1 Thessalonians 4:13-18).

In the last verse of the above text, the New International and the New Revised Standard versions read, "*Therefore encourage each other with these words.*" The word translated "comfort" or "encourage" in this verse is the same one translated "exhort" in 1 Thessalonians 4:1 and many other passages. The Greek word *parakaleo* is a combination of two words: *to call* plus *along side of, by, or near*. The literal sense of the word is found in the father's calling of the elder brother aside entreating him to join the feast for the prodigal who had returned (Luke 15:28). When a father calls his son aside, the reason for the separation is to impart instruction, information or correction. The emphasis is not on the manner of approach, but the effect of the approach. In its general use, the Greek word *parakaleo* has the same connotation. The effect of being encouraged was seen as the result of the message given.

Now back to our text, notice how these discouraged and depressed Christians were to be encouraged. Paul told them to *"encourage each other with these words."* He answered their feeling of discouragement with the revelation of God's will. It was not by Paul's style that they were encouraged, but by truth. It was not by a change in atmosphere or setting that they were encouraged, but by coming to correctly understand God's will. As long as they had erroneous views, they could not receive true encouragement. True encouragement had to come from correction of that false idea and replacing it with truth. Hence, true encouragement came from God's will.

Encouragement Based on Bible Instruction

This same point is found throughout this context and others inspired by God. The saints were encouraged or exhorted (*parakaleo*) to live properly (1 Thessalonians 4:1). How? Paul said it was *"as ye received of us how ye ought to walk and to please God."* The word was the source of the encouragement. Paul prayed for all that they might be comforted in their hope (2 Thessalonians 2:16-17). How? He said it would take place *"in every good work and word."* Without the word and its application in their lives, there could be no real or lasting encouragement. Elders must be able to exhort or encourage the flock (Titus 1:9). How? God told them to do it *"in the sound doctrine,"* adding the instruction to *"convict the gainsayer"* as a necessary part of the process. As they came to see the eternal truth of the God they sought to serve, they had the encouragement needed. No person, style or setting could match that given by God's will.

A Parallel on True Encouragement

While in school, I played football in South Texas. We practiced long hours in hot weather. Our coaches drilled and instructed us hour upon hour. When we were not being instructed on specific skills used as a lineman, we lifted weights over and over. After

we were tired from exhausting workouts, we ran one wind sprint after another. All of that was done to prepare us to play the game. On the day of the game, our school gathered for a pep rally. It was held in an air conditioned gym where we heard enthusiastic cheers from the students while we smiled, all dressed in clean game jerseys. The pep rally was intended to encourage us and I liked it. But at game time, I was usually faced with a big, strong, mean guy on the other side of the line that I had to block. When the fourth quarter came and I was hot, tired and bruised, it was not the pep rally with its enthusiastic atmosphere that encouraged me to block that guy I faced. It was the preparation of a coach that drilled and drilled techniques, strength and correction day after day that encouraged me to know I could do it. I knew I could do it because I had been taught properly and had done it repeatedly.

Conclusion

What is the point? We often see Christians seeking for externals to give them encouragement when they need to seek the true source. Some say they could be more encouraged by a different speaker or a different style or a different setting. They seek the spiritual equivalent of a pep rally. The simple fact is this — Christians are brought to real and lasting encouragement *in* and *through* the truth of God. It is not accomplished by pop psychology, an enthusiastic style of speech or artificial changes in atmosphere. Such trappings may make one feel more enthused for the moment, but the feeling will not last. True encouragement comes from God's word. When we fail to study and learn and grow, we are weak and depressed. When we let the word dwell within us richly, it will show in our speech and actions (Colossians 3:16-17). No externals can match the encouragement in the gospel of a Savior who was crucified for us.

Need some encouragement? Pick up your Bible and study. Go to a meeting nearby and hear a lesson of truth which will point you to God's will and correct you from wrong. Find a sinner and teach him. Look for a brother or sister to serve. You will find true encouragement and impart it rather than blaming others for a problem caused by self.

- Harry Osborne

The Spirit Is Willing But the Flesh Is Weak

On the night of the Lord's betrayal, he went with his three disciples Peter, James and John to the Garden of Gethsemane to pray. Matthew reports that in the solitude of the quiet garden "he began to be sorrowful and sore troubled" (26:37). Knowing what awaited him that night and the following day, he needed the company, prayers, and support of his nearest friends.

But they let him down. He asked of them only that they wait nearby and watch with him. When he returned to them after a short while, he found them sleeping instead of watching. They awoke to hear not a harsh voice of condemnation, but one filled with personal disappointment: "What, could ye not watch with me one hour?" Surely they could have seen the depth of the gloom that had settled over his soul as he came to the garden to pray! Surely they must have felt the sense of foreboding that had attended the trip to Jerusalem and all the events of that week! Yet, when he needed them most they had failed him. They had fallen asleep like this was just any other night.

The advice Jesus gave them that night was filled with profound implications both for them on that night and for us in our own lives as

well. "Watch and pray, that ye enter not into temptation: the spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak" (v. 41). With these words he slipped back into the darkness and prayed again that his Father might let this cup pass from him. Shortly, though, the disciples were asleep again (v. 43). Before the night was through he was betrayed into the hands of his enemies and tried on capital charges. The next day he was cruelly crucified.

Christ's words to them on that dark night have several important lessons for us today. Let us make note of a few of them below:

The Spirit Indeed is Willing in Good People

The disciples of Christ were not bad men. They were good men. They wanted to go with him to the garden and to watch with him that night. Their spirits were willing.

The importance of this point cannot be minimized. The world is filled with people whose hearts are unwilling. There exists in this world in great profusion a "spirit that worketh in the sons of disobedience" (Eph. 2:2). This was true in the first century, and it is true now. It is all about us, manifesting itself in forms both subtle and flagrant. This spirit is unwilling to yield itself to the loving appeals of the word of God. It is well illustrated by the answer of old Israel to the prophet Jeremiah's call to repentance: "Thus saith Jehovah, Stand ye in the ways and see, and ask for the old paths, where is the good way; and walk therein, and ye shall find rest for your souls: but they said, We will not walk therein. And I set watchmen over you, saying, Hearken to the sound of the trumpet; but they said, We will not hearken" (Jer. 6:16-17).

So, when there are those whose hearts are willing to submit to the Father's determinations, there is reason for us to rejoice. But we need to

be realistic too. A willing heart cannot, by itself, achieve the goal toward which we are striving.

But The Flesh is Weak Even in the Best of People

No doubt the disciples fell asleep that night because they were tired. It had been a long day, filled with heart-stopping moments of challenge and argument between Jesus and the Jewish leadership. The anxiety level had been high since they started the trip to Jerusalem several days before. As soon as they got still they fell asleep. The reason: the flesh was weak. Their intentions were good, but good intentions at times can fall prey to fleshly weakness. In this case they did.

Paul described this struggle in his own being between the desire to do good and the fleshly feebleness which he sometimes displayed: "For we know that the law is spiritual: but I am carnal, sold under sin. For that which I do I know not: for not what I would, that do I practice; but what I hate, that I do. But if what I would not, that I do, I consent unto the law that it is good. So now it is no more I that do it, but sin which dwelleth in me. For I know that in me, that is, in my flesh, dwelleth no good thing: for to will is present with me, but to do that which is good is not" (Rom. 7:14-18). God's remedy for this weakness of the human condition is put before us in the person of Jesus Christ and his redemptive work on the cross: "I thank God through Jesus Christ our Lord" (v. 24).

Many times today we meet those who intend to do what is right but who fail miserably. They make promises. They make New Year's resolutions. They hope to do better. They plan to do better. But they don't do any better, even though the spirit is willing, at least for a time.

If you are one of such people, the redemptive work of Christ at the cross will give you a new start in life and another chance at faithfulness. If you repent and pray for forgiveness, you can start over again (Acts 8:22).

But, dear reader, please play close attention to the lesson of the rest of the verse:

Christ Gave The Sleepy Disciples Some Advice That Applies To All People: "Watch And Pray"

It would have been virtually impossible for these men to have fallen asleep if their minds and bodies had been occupied in some intensive activity. Watching and praying would have done it. But they fell asleep again because they apparently did not watch and pray. They failed the Lord Jesus because they did not listen to him! We fail him oftentimes today for the same reason.

The Lord's counsel to the disciples was truly profound, although it usually escapes the reader. The point is that one ought always to be engaged in the good and beneficial activities of life, or else spiritual sleep will "slip up on us" before we know it. Those around us are lulled to sleep by the hum-drum activities of life: working and making a living, doing chores around the house and in the yard, recreating and partying, eating and sleeping, etc.: "So then let us not sleep, as do the rest, but let us watch and be sober" (1 Thess. 5:6).

Truly, "an idle mind is the Devil's workshop." Let us keep busy in the Lord's vineyard till he comes. Let us "Watch and Pray"! Or, as Paul put it as he concluded his great chapter on the resurrection: "Wherefore, my beloved brethren, be ye steadfast, unmovable, always abounding in the

work of the Lord, forasmuch as ye know that your labor is not vain in the Lord" (1 Cor. 15:58).

- Dan King, Sr.

THIS WEEK'S LESSONS: Sunday morning: Guest speaker: Geoffrey Knudtson – *"The Providence of God"* (text: Rom. 8:28); Sunday evening: Guest speaker: Kent Baumgardner - *"What Does The Lord Require of You?"* (text: Micah 6:6-8). Thank you for preaching the gospel of Christ!