The verb we translate as “encourage” is *parakaleo* (Greek), which can also be rendered as “to comfort,” “to console,” or “to exhort.” Pastor Ortlund adds that “encouragement is about the life-giving power of our shared beliefs and our shared life in the Lord.” The noun form of *parakaleo* is the word Jesus used when referring to the Holy Spirit, a word variously rendered as “advocate,” “helper,” “companion,” or “comforter” (in John 14:26).

In his first letter to the Thessalonians, the apostle Paul tells his Christian readers to “*encourage one another and build up each other*” (5:11). We must not miss the “one another” part of that instruction, for it paints a picture of what the church should be. Across the New Testament we find many ways to encourage one another: “love one another” (John 13:34–35), “live in harmony with one another” (Romans 12:16), “welcome one another” (Romans 15:7), “greet one another” (Romans 16:16), “have the same care for one another” (1 Corinthians 12:25), “forgive one another” (Ephesians 4:32), “confess our sins to one another” (James 5:16), and “pray for one another” (James 5:16).

The opposite of being an encourager is being overly critical, dismissive, or disparaging. Recognizing our tendency to be overly critical is the first step in changing our attitude and behavior. Keith tells of sitting in a restaurant with his grown son. When the son was a teenager, he got into drugs and bad company, which created a lot of stress in the family and anxiety for his parents. Father and son were strong-willed, often at odds during those years. With support and hard work, the son worked through his problems.

While Keith and his son waited for their meals to arrive, they noticed a couple sitting at a nearby table. The woman was dressed like a cowgirl, complete with a red Stetson, a western outfit, and boots. She also had on a good bit of glittery jewelry. Keith started to make a snarky remark about her appearance, but his son stopped him, saying, “Don’t, Dad. Life is hard enough. Maybe what she’s wearing makes her feel good. And we’re not perfect either.” The father was smart enough to shut up and realize that his son was the one seeing things clearly.

Keith became even more convinced of that the next day, when, while reading some devotional material, he came across these words from Ephesians: “*Let no evil talk come out of your mouths, but only what is useful for building up, as there is need, so that your words may give grace to those who hear*” (4:29).

A few days after that, Keith was sitting in a physical therapy facility, waiting his turn for therapy for a minor foot problem. While there, an older woman entered, moving slowly aided by a walker, and wincing in obvious pain. She sat down on a chair not far from Keith and after a few moments, the two began to talk. She asked Keith why he was there, and he told her about his foot. She described the much more debilitating condition she had, and how her surgery had not helped as much as she had hoped. She explained that she was now relying on the therapy, but that it caused her significant pain. Wearily she added, “I don’t know how much more I can take.” Recalling his son’s comment in the restaurant, Keith turned to the woman, and said, “Don’t you give up! You can do this. God bless you.” An encouraging word is a ministry all by itself, a ministry in which we can all engage.

**One day Thomas Edison came home from school with a note from his teacher. With tears in her eyes, his mother read the note out loud: “**Your son is a genius. This school is too small for him and does not have enough good teachers to train him. Please teach him yourself.” She did just that, and **Edison became a great inventor. Later, Edison was looking through old family things. He saw a folded paper in the corner of a drawer in a desk. It was the note from his teacher, and it read: *“***Your son is addled**[mentally ill].**We won’t let him come to school anymore.” **Edison cried for hours and then he wrote in his diary: “Thomas Alva Edison was an addled child that, by a hero mother, became the genius of the century.” Edison’s mother chose to encourage her son, rather than tear him down.**

Edison took his mother’s message of encouragement to heart. Years later, after inventing the light bulb, Edison handed one of the delicate glass globes to an office boy. The boy was nervous about handling this precious invention and he dropped it. The boy was scared that he would get fired, but two days later, Edison handed him another light bulb. Edison’s assistants, surprised, asked him: “Why? There are chances of him dropping it again and all your effort could do to waste.” Edison replied, “It took me roughly one day to construct that bulb and even if he drops it again, I can construct another bulb in a day. But if I don’t give him the same task again, then he would have lost his self-belief and confidence which would be very difficult to get back, and I don’t want that to happen.”

What encouragers like Peter and Paul, Keith and Thomas Edison do is provide support, instill confidence, and offer hope. Likewise, God encourages us in (at least) four ways. **God encourages us through answered prayers.** *“Until now you have not asked for anything in My name. Ask and you will receive, and your joy will be complete”* (John 16:24). Few things encourage us like seeing how real God is; how good and how faithful God is when God answers prayer. When you feel desperate, fearful, or anxious, remember back to when God answered a prayer. That same good, kind, and faithful God is ready and willing to answer you now.

**God encourages us through deep friendship.** *“A friend loves at all times, and a brother or sister is born to help in time of need”*(Proverbs 17:17).One of my greatest blessings is the encouragement I receive from you, my faithful family. What is most amazing is that those notes, texts, emails, or calls always seem to arrive on days when I am feeling down or lonely and fighting discouragement. Great friends help us to endure tough days.

**God encourages us through unexpected tragedy.** *“The heart of the wise is in the house of mourning, but the heart of fools is in the house of pleasure.”* (Ecclesiastes 7:4). Too often, we think encouragement only comes from living the good life. While good people, good circumstances, and good news are very encouraging, sometimes God uses tragedy to snap us out of our preoccupation with worldly things. We are all mortal: death is not an “if” proposition but a “when.” Life makes no sense at all if there is not a good God, if we are not made for more than life here and now. Having that *perspective* is a powerful encouragement. Heaven is real! God is good! Jesus saves! The Spirit empowers! This is not all there is! All the things we worry about pale in comparison to that truth.

**God encourages us through personal progress.** *“Desire accomplished is sweet to the soul…”* (Proverbs 13:19). When I glance back over my life, I have a lot of progress to celebrate. Although we never arrive, *progress* is one of the most encouraging forces in our lives. It gives hope. As we see change, we become more like Christ and accomplish things we never thought possible. My prayer is that the God of encouragement may fill your heart with strength, love, and hope today.

Prayer: Encouraging God, we are reminded of the important role that encouragers play in our lives. They give us the benefit of the doubt. They reach out to us when others turn away. They see our need even when we don’t verbally express it. They steer us in the right direction when we’ve taken a wrong turn. They model for us the reflection of Christ. We thank You, God, for Your Spirit manifested through these encouragers who physically, emotionally, and spiritually bless our lives by their encouraging words and actions. Prompt us to spread the same kind of encouragement to those whom we can bless. In Jesus’ name, we pray. Amen

**Sources**

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**A Little Encouragement**

Sunday, April 16, 2023 [1 Peter 1:3-9](https://biblegateway.com/passage/?search=1+Peter+1%3a3-9&language=en&version=NRSVUE)

Federated Church, Fergus Falls, MN

Sabith Khan is a professor at a university in Southern California. Two years ago, he signed up for online Arabic classes, a one-on-one learning experience, conducted over Zoom. Khan told his teacher that he had struggled in previous attempts to learn the language. “We are all students, my friend,” his teacher said. “Don’t worry; I am here to teach you. You are a very hardworking student, and it is my pleasure to help you.”

Khan felt strange in the role of a vulnerable student in need of help; but his teacher eased his discomfort, complimenting him for his efforts even for the smallest progress. Hearing praise from his tutor made Khan surprisingly happy and more confident. Khan wondered whether he might be a more effective teacher if he learned to be more generous with words of encouragement. So, he changed his teaching approach. “Every time I grade my own students or evaluate their work critically (as I must), [my teacher’s] example comes to mind,” Khan said, “and I remember to pause and praise them publicly — every so often — even as I offer constructive criticism.” He believes this practice creates a better learning environment.

For Khan, the power of encouragement was a new discovery, but encouragement as empowering people who are struggling is not a new idea. In our reading, the apostle Peter speaks encouragingly about hope to Christians who are suffering for their faith. Peter praised his readers, saying, “*In this you rejoice, even if now for a little while you have had to suffer various trials, so that the genuineness of your faith — being more precious than gold that, though perishable, is tested by fire — may be found to result in praise and glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed…for you are receiving the outcome of your faith, the salvation of your souls.”* Near the end of this letter, Peter states his purpose for writing clearly: *“I have written this short letter to encourage you…”* (5:12).

Everyone needs support. Life is difficult, and it is too easy to get buried under the problems that come our way. Sometimes a word of encouragement is all that stands between us and giving up, breaking down or simply living in sadness. A colleague, driving through Maryland, noticed a church named “The Ministry of Encouragement,” and it struck him as a great name for a location where Christ is shared. Pastor Ray Ortlund says, “Encouragement is what the gospel *feels* like as it moves from one believer to another.”