

# *Priceless Treasures of Encouragement*

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## *Aleta's Story—The Freedom Truth Brings*

From the time my husband decided to leave me until it actually happened, many close friends tried to encourage me with well-meaning words. "He won't leave," they assured me. "He knows he has a good thing with you. It's a phase!"

Although I appreciated their good intentions, the words rang hollow. I knew that God doesn't always grant happy endings—not even to Christians. My well-intentioned friends had no biblical basis for their reassuring statements.

Then God gave me a friend whose faith of steel had been forged in the heat of tough times. She had an unorthodox response to my story of broken dreams. "Your husband may very well leave you and your children," she said. "So you need to ask yourself, 'Will I trust God to care for us, husband or no husband?'"

The turning point in my fearful journey came when she directed me to submit my raging emotions to the truths and promises of God. Her words set me free because they helped me face reality. She had the courage to step into my pain and to encourage me with the only thing that could help—the truth.

## *Jane's Story—The Gift of the Joy Box*

Chronic pain was affecting me emotionally and spiritually as well as physically. As my body grew tolerant to the medication, doctors increased the dosage from one or two pills a day to eight

or ten. But the pain remained the same. The only things that changed were my feelings of loneliness and helplessness; they continued to increase.

Then a special Christian sister stepped into my life. She always seemed to know when to call or send a card. She took me out on Friday nights “just to talk,” and she gave me a “joy box” in which I kept many of the treasures of encouragement she sent to me.

My pain finally drove me to search for treatment in a psychiatric hospital. A Christian roommate assured me that God had not abandoned me. I asked God to teach me how to love and serve Him on His terms. I asked Him to take my eyes off of myself and my pain and to help me focus on others. As I diligently prayed for God to teach me how to die to self, I received another special treasure. He eventually removed my physical pain!

The time has come for me to give a “joy box” to someone else and to fill it with treasures of encouragement—the way God, through my friend, encouraged me.



*God keeps His  
promises through other  
believers.*

The news was like an explosion in the heart of our home. Our sixteen-year-old son, Mark, and his girlfriend, Kelly, had been killed. The darkest night of my soul had begun. God’s promises mocked my sorrow. How could I ever trust Him again?

The answer came through a body of believers who functioned as God’s promise keepers. Feeling betrayed by God, I refused to acknowledge His love for me, but God demonstrated that love through His physical representation on earth—the church.

From the moment people learned of Mark’s death, they began sending cards and personal notes of encouragement. These along

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with their gifts of practical service were our lifeline to the reality of God's character.

Before Mark's death I had taught for many years on the subject of encouragement, but my beliefs had never been tested in the laboratory of grief. My own experience caused me to wonder how many people in the body of Christ have not healed from life's devastating blows simply because the other members of the body are not fulfilling their duty to encourage.

Because my husband was the pastor of our church, we received much support. Many people stretched themselves to find ways to minister to us. Others, however, treated us as if we were lepers. And some of those who avoided us were people I thought would never let us down. Why? There had to be a good reason.

I had to look only as far as my own life to find clues, for I am not innocent in the disregard of encouragement. Sometimes I am caring and sensitive. I send cards with special notes, make phone calls, take a meal to a housebound mom, greet the newly widowed with a hug, and speak encouragingly to my husband and children.

At other times, however, I am not such a good friend. I neglect to send a card, acknowledge the death of a loved one, or hug the parent of a rebellious child. I guide conversations away from deep needs toward trivial matters, and I even forget my promises to pray. The longer I neglect the need, the more embarrassed I am to see the friend I disappointed.

Why do I disregard such simple means of encouragement? Why do so many others refuse to get involved beyond a superficial level in the lives of struggling believers? Why do we often view these commands as drudgery and resent obeying them? Why do we neglect such a great opportunity? Five reasons come to mind:

- 1. Our own lives are full of urgent demands.*
- 2. We don't know what to say or do, so we decide it is better to say or do nothing than to say or do the wrong thing.*
- 3. We give up when our initial efforts show no results.*

4. *We are insensitive.*

These explanations are all variations of the one real reason we fail to encourage one another:

5. *We do not understand our identity in Christ.*

As our understanding of our stature as God's children increases, our reasons for failing to encourage others fall away. When the Word of God defines our identity and when our intimacy with Christ determines our character, not only will we know how to display God's love to others, we will desire to do so as well.

Rather than risk intimacy with Christ, however, we try to pass the buck. To ease the guilt of noninvolvement, we charge the church with the job of meeting needs. We forget that we are the church!

In congregations where believers think of their church as a living organism—a body—rather than as just an institution, the church pulsates with hope and healing. When church members practice the ministry of encouragement that flows from intimacy with Christ, the church becomes a healing place for wounded believers and a magnet to seekers.

*The Meaning of Encouragement*

One dictionary<sup>1</sup> defines *encourage* this way: "To give courage, spirit, or hope; to stimulate."

*Courage*: "Mental or moral strength to venture, persevere, and withstand danger, fear, or difficulty."

*Spirit*: "The activating or essential principle influencing a person."

*Hope*: "A desire accompanied by expectation of or belief in fulfillment."

*Stimulate*: "To excite to activity or growth."

Imagine being able to affect another person in such a powerful way. Many people today would have us believe that we can accom-

<sup>1</sup> *Merriam Webster's Collegiate Dictionary*, 10th ed. (Springfield, Mass.: Merriam-Webster, Inc., 1994).

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plish this with warm words and fuzzy feelings, but the scriptural practice of encouragement demands much more. Scriptural encouragement is ongoing, daily, and consistent. It requires perseverance, and it includes the following practices:

*Strengthening:* “And we urge you, brothers, warn those who are idle, encourage the timid, help the weak, be patient with everyone” (1 Thessalonians 5:14).

*Motivating:* “Now go out and encourage your men. I swear by the Lord that if you don’t go out, not a man will be left with you by nightfall. This will be worse for you than all the calamities that have come upon you from your youth till now” (2 Samuel 19:7).

*Assuring:* “But your assistant, Joshua son of Nun, will enter it. Encourage him, because he will lead Israel to inherit it” (Deuteronomy 1:38).

*Exhorting:* “When he arrived and saw the evidence of the grace of God, he was glad and encouraged them all to remain true to the Lord with all their hearts” (Acts 11:23).

*Supporting:* “. . . learn to do right! Seek justice, encourage the oppressed. Defend the cause of the fatherless, plead the case of the widow” (Isaiah 1:17).

*Disciplining:* “See to it, brothers, that none of you has a sinful, unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God. But encourage one another daily, as long as it is called Today, so that none of you may be hardened by sin’s deceitfulness. We have come to share in Christ if we hold firmly till the end the confidence we had at first. As has just been said: ‘Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts as you did in the rebellion’” (Hebrews 3:12–15).

True encouragement pumps hope into the receiver and also into the giver.

### *God’s Promise Keepers*

When I was reeling from those haunting words, “Your son is dead,” how could I believe promises like this one in Hebrews: “God has said, ‘Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you’” (13:5)? In fact, how could I believe any of God’s other promises of security?

In the dark periods of life it is difficult to believe that God will keep His many promises. But He does, and He often does it through other believers whom He enables and charges with the responsibility of encouraging one another.

Long before the now-popular Promise Keepers' men's movement entered the scene, God established that *all* His children would be promise keepers—*His* promise keepers.

Consider 2 Corinthians 1:3–5:

Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves have received from God. For just as the sufferings of Christ flow over into our lives, so also through Christ our comfort overflows.

God's compassion streaming through us and into others is His "divine solution" to the problems of discouragement, grief, and sorrow. God holds the members of His body responsible for making sure that other members experience His love:

A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another. (John 13:34–35)

When I was grieving the death of my son, the faithfulness of other believers soothed my hurting heart. When members of His body were faithful and entered my pain, God used their sensitive words, hugs, tears, and practical acts of service to demonstrate His presence. Without it, healing would have taken much longer. I imagined God saying to members of the body, *Sharon is missing Mark and feeling abandoned by Me. I promised her I would never forsake her, but grief blinds her to My presence. Be My ambassador and let Me love her through you. Write her a note, share your memories of Mark, pray for her right now. Be My promise keeper for this moment.*

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God calls us to encourage those caught in the daily grind of life as well as those in crisis.

Consider the single mother overwhelmed by all the responsibilities resting on her. What is she thinking as she reads, “For this God is our God for ever and ever; he will be our guide even to the end” (Psalm 48:14) and “I am the Lord, your God, who takes hold of your right hand and says to you, Do not fear; I will help you” (Isaiah 41:13).

God can keep His promise to guide her; the wisdom she finds in His Word can keep her headed in the right direction. But how does He take hold of her right hand and tell her not to be afraid? He does it through other believers. He wants and expects our cooperation.

God commands older women to teach younger women how to live (Titus 2:3–5), and an important aspect of teaching is encouragement. Young women need the assurance that they are not alone and that they are doing many things right. I can imagine God prompting a mature believer with thoughts like this one: *That young mom is overwhelmed. Her fear of the unknown is all she can see. The sound of shattering dreams has made her deaf to My Word. Let her know she is not alone. Let My wisdom and love flow through you to her. Represent Me by helping her with the children or inviting her to dinner. Be My promise keeper for this hour in her life.*

My son’s kindergarten teacher encouraged me with this kind of hope during a particularly difficult stage in my son’s life. “Sharon,” she said, “my son is older now, so believe me when I say, ‘this too shall pass!’” With those few words, she calmed my fear, not with empty promises, but with knowledge from her own experience. God used her to guide me through the maze of parenting.

The miracle of encouragement is that God can use even simple acts to effect dramatic change. A smile, a kind word, a touch on the shoulder. When those gestures emanate from a heart that truly wants to emulate Christ, the Holy Spirit uses them to instill courage, spirit, and hope—both in the receiver and in the giver.

In my own journey through grief, every act of kindness toward me and my family was a brick on the pathway leading toward God.

No one could take away our pain, but God used each block of encouragement, no matter how small the giver thought it was, to take us one step closer to His healing.

But sometimes encouragement calls for more than a smile, a note, or a kind word. Sometimes it calls for commitment and sacrifice.

### *Why We Encourage*

The ministry of encouragement requires a deep and personal relationship to Jesus Christ, and it demands a lifestyle of servanthood that is rooted in the Incarnation. Authentic scriptural encouragement is a response to God's work in our lives. Because of what Christ has done for us, we are to encourage others (Hebrews 10:24–25). In Philippians 2:1–4 Paul instructs the church to respond to one another with humility and love *because of the comfort of the love of Jesus*. He tells the Thessalonians to “Encourage one another with these words” (1 Thessalonians 4:18). What words? The promise of eternity with the Lord.

Hebrews 10 tells us that the foundation for the ministry of encouragement is our own redemption. Because we have been forgiven, “there is no longer any sacrifice for sin. Therefore, . . . since we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus, . . . let us consider how we may spur one another toward love and good deeds. Let us not give up meeting together . . . but let us encourage one another” (Hebrews 10:18–25).

The word *consider* (v. 24) means “to observe fully: behold, discover, perceive.” This is not a description of a superficial relationship or a quick fix. Biblical encouragement requires time and effort. In response to God's great love for us, we will get to know others so we can discern the best way to stimulate them to reflect the character of Christ. Our motive in encouragement is their good, not ours.

The Greek word translated *spur* (v. 24) in the NIV is *paroxuno*, which means “to sharpen alongside.” To help people reach their potential as children of God requires that we come “alongside” of



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them. This is the same ministry as that of our Comforter, the Holy Spirit, who comes alongside as our encourager. Proverbs speaks of this principle: “As iron sharpens iron, so one man sharpens another” (27:17).

The phrase *give up* (v. 25) means “to leave behind in some place” or “to desert.” In other words, we must not desert those who lag behind. We are responsible for one another’s well-being.

Gail MacDonald writes about how Jesus encouraged His disciples:

Jesus prepared the way for these men by going before them at important moments in their lives together. He saw to it that the Upper Room was arranged in order that they might enjoy strength-giving fellowship. After they had failed, he made sure they received the message that he would go ahead of them and meet them in Galilee. This message was especially to be delivered word-of-mouth to Peter because he would need comfort more than anyone. Later, after another night of failure, the Lord was kind enough to prepare a breakfast for a group of tired and chilly fisherman/disciples before they reached the shore. And he has gone before us all to prepare a home in heaven. Could one of the reasons we find being a comforter-friend so difficult today be the time and forethought it requires—time and forethought we are unable or unwilling to give?<sup>2</sup>

The miracle of encouragement takes place as we develop intimacy with Christ. Intimacy with Him teaches us the importance of connecting with one another, which naturally will lead us into deeper and more meaningful relationships. The spiritual needs of people in our circle of influence are made clear as a result of our time spent with Christ.

Imagine the unity and public testimony of churches if obedience to Hebrews 10:24 were the norm: “And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds.” Instead of

<sup>2</sup> Gail MacDonald, *A Step Farther and Higher* (Portland, Ore.: Multnomah, 1993), 180.

demeaning a volunteer for doing an inadequate job, we will search for a place where she can succeed. Imagine the harmony in our homes if we were to give encouragement a place of prominence. Think of what might happen if smiles and hugs for a moody teenager were a more natural response than critical words.

The possibilities for positive influence are endless.

### *The Poke Cake*

The recipe for the once-popular “poke cake” calls for poking holes in a baked cake and pouring liquid, flavored gelatin over the top. The color and flavor of the gelatin penetrate the cake in a way that is similar to how the life of Jesus permeates our lives. The time we spend with Him in His Word and in His service are the holes into which His Spirit pours His character. When our lives are broken and given in service to others, the vibrant attributes of Christ add beauty and flavor to our own bland nature.

Time spent listening to God, seeking His wisdom, talking to Him, obeying Him, and stepping out by faith to encourage others will cultivate intimacy with Christ and result in His character being revealed in us. When our obedience flows from a deepening awareness of our position in Christ, His presence in us will be evident to those around us.

The finished work of Christ is our motivation. Through the ministry of encouragement, we offer to others what we have found in Him.

If you cooperate in this lifelong process, do not be surprised someday when a friend tells you about words you do not remember speaking that changed her life and set her heart toward God. Do not be surprised when a friend reveals that your quiet presence, at a time when you felt helpless in the face of her great calamity, gave her a sense of peace and the joy of God’s nearness.

In the horrendous grief I experienced after the death of my son and his friend, the body of Christ became God’s physical arms, holding me tightly in His grip. God gave me the treasure of their scriptural encouragement, forcing me to acknowledge His faithful-

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ness, drawing me from dark anger and sorrow into the glimmering light of His eyes of love.

Throughout this book you will read stories about people whose lives radically changed when someone obeyed the Holy Spirit and encouraged them. Will you listen and offer to another person the treasure of encouragement? Will you be God's promise keeper?

### *Getting Focused*

- 1 Define encouragement.
- 2 How do you encourage others?
- 3 What encourages you?

### *Staying Focused*

#### **Day One**

- 1 Read John 15:1–17. Jesus calls on each of us to bear fruit. What is the prerequisite for bearing fruit? (v. 4)
- 2 What is the motivation for bearing fruit? (vv. 9–10)
- 3 What changes in your life will you make to cultivate your relationship to Christ?

#### **Day Two**

- 1 Read Ephesians 3:7–21. What was the driving force in Paul's life? (vv. 7–9)
- 2 What is God's purpose for the church? (vv. 10–11)
- 3 Who is the church?
- 4 In your circle of influence how are you fulfilling God's purpose for the church?
- 5 Paul says, "For this reason I kneel before the Father" (v. 14). Why did Paul pray?
- 6 What did Paul pray? (vv. 16–20)
- 7 Using Paul's prayer as a guide, write out a prayer for yourself. (For example, "Because of the great gift of salvation, I pray that your glorious riches will strengthen me with power through your Spirit in my inner being.")

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### **Day Three**

- 1 Read Philippians 3:7–16. What is the driving force in Paul's life? (vv. 7–11)
- 2 Did his passion for God make obedience easy or perfect? (vv. 12–14)
- 3 People often rationalize their refusal to serve God because they feel inadequate. Paul's response to that excuse might be: "Only let us live up to what we have already attained" (v. 16). Are you obeying what you already know?
- 4 How should what you already know about Christ's accomplishments affect your ministry of encouragement?
- 5 Who will you encourage today? Write a brief statement about how Christ, through you, can encourage that person. Now do it!

### **Day Four**

- 1 Read Philippians 2:1–18. Paul calls on the Philippians to put aside their own interests in relationships. Why?
- 2 Ask God to show you what interests you need to put aside in order to serve Him.

### **Day Five**

- 1 Read Titus 2. Before Paul outlines the godly behavior Titus is to teach, he exhorts him to teach sound doctrine. Why?
- 2 After Paul outlines some specific aspects of godly behavior, he states, "For the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men" (v. 11). What impact should this truth have on the way we live?
- 3 What is your motivation for doing good? (vv. 12–14)

### **Day Six**

- 1 Read John 13:34–35. How has Jesus loved you? Be specific.
- 2 How are you loving those in your circle of influence? How will you love them? Be specific!

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*Living Focused*

Reread “Jane’s Story—The Gift of the Joy Box.” Ask God to bring to mind the name of a person in your circle of influence who needs a “joy box.” When you give this gift, commit to filling it with treasures of encouragement—notes, cards, small tokens of love. Allow God to use you to keep His promises to her.