

The Fellowship of Encouragement

I don't know how long it's been since I've been fishing," said Alonzo, readjusting his wide-brim straw hat atop his bald head.

"I'm so glad you invited us, Isaiah," said Prince, "but I will be coming home with the biggest catch of the day!"

Isaiah smiled. They were great friends and wonderful men of God. Isaiah asked his friends to accompany him on his favorite pastime because he wanted and needed fellowship. He was under fire from two deacons at church who were trying to stir up trouble for him. They wanted Isaiah to be "dethroned" as head deacon.

He also had to worry about his wife, whose breast cancer had returned four years after her mastectomy. And if that wasn't bad enough, one of his grandsons was facing jail time for a vehicular manslaughter charge.

For the most part, Alonzo and Prince practiced the art of presence. Over the course of the next four hours, they listened intently to their friend, offering encouragement, Scripture, and humor when needed.

"I can't predict the outcome of these trials," Isaiah said, then sighed. "But I do know the Lord will see me through, and I'm so grateful and blessed to have you brothers."

"For sure, man," Alonzo said. "Whatever comes, we're going to be right here with you."

1. *Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. said, "Life's most persistent and urgent question is, 'What are you doing for others?'" How does this quote help to explain fellowship?*

2. *To whom do you turn to cope with trials in your life?*

3. *How important are encouragement and fellowship with God's people in facing those trials?*

Thanks Be to God

1 Thessalonians 2:13-16, KJV

13 For this cause also thank we God without ceasing, because, when ye received the word of God which ye heard of us, ye received it not as the word of men, but as it is in truth, the word of God, which effectually worketh also in you that believe.

14 For ye, brethren, became followers of the churches of God which in Judaea are in Christ Jesus: for ye also have suffered like things of your own countrymen, even as they have of the Jews:

15 Who both killed the Lord Jesus, and their own prophets, and have persecuted us; and they please not God, and are contrary to all men:

16 Forbidding us to speak to the Gentiles that they might be saved, to fill up their sins alway: for the wrath is come upon them to the uttermost.

1 Thessalonians 2:13-16, NIV

¹³And we also thank God continually because, when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as a human word, but as it actually is, the word of God, which is indeed at work in you who believe. ¹⁴For you, brothers and sisters, became imitators of God's churches in Judea, which are in Christ Jesus: You suffered from your own people the same things those churches suffered from the Jews ¹⁵who killed the Lord Jesus and the prophets and also drove us out. They displease God and are hostile to everyone ¹⁶in their effort to keep us from speaking to the Gentiles so that they may be saved. In this way they always heap up their sins to the limit. The wrath of God has come upon them at last.

First Thessalonians 2:13-16 is the conclusion to a larger passage in which Paul defends his message and actions while with the Thessalonians. Paul begins with thanksgiving for the brothers and sisters there. After reminding the believers that it was through him that they heard the word, Paul gives the reason for his thankfulness: They received his message as God's word. Further, Paul was confident that the message was at work in them, as

shown by their imitation of the church in Judea which also endured affliction. In 1 Thessalonians 1:6 Paul writes that the Thessalonian believers were imitators of himself and of the Lord Jesus, as they received the word with joy “in the midst of severe suffering.” Just as Paul had been driven from the city (Acts 17:5-10), the brothers and sisters in Thessalonica were now persecuted by former friends and neighbors in their city.

Paul was a Jew and had great love for his people (Rom. 9:1-3), but he was keenly aware that hardness of heart had prevented many Jews from responding to Jesus with faith. Paul knew that even Jesus and the prophets faced opposition. What Paul meant by the “wrath” which has come upon his persecutors is not clear (1 Thess. 2:16). He may have had in mind a recent event, a recent famine or the expulsion of Jews from Rome in A.D. 49, or perhaps he may be looking to a future event. Whether immediate or future, it stands in contrast to the future hope of those in the family of faith. Paul writes, “For God did not appoint us to suffer wrath but to receive salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Thess. 5:9).

4. *Why is Paul certain that the Thessalonians received and believed his preaching as the Word of God?*

5. *How are Paul’s words an encouragement to the Thessalonian believers?*

Love and Concern for the Brothers

1 Thessalonians 2:17—3:5, KJV

17 But we, brethren, being taken from you for a short time in presence, not in heart, endeavoured the more abundantly to see your face with great desire.

18 Wherefore we would have come unto you, even I Paul,

1 Thessalonians 2:17—3:5, NIV

¹⁷But, brothers and sisters, when we were orphaned by being separated from you for a short time (in person, not in thought), out of our intense longing we made every effort to see you. ¹⁸For we wanted to come to you—certainly I, Paul,

once and again; but Satan hindered us.

19 For what is our hope, or joy, or crown of rejoicing? Are not even ye in the presence of our Lord Jesus Christ at his coming?

20 For ye are our glory and joy.

1 Wherefore when we could no longer forbear, we thought it good to be left at Athens alone;

2 And sent Timotheus, our brother, and minister of God, and our fellow labourer in the gospel of Christ, to establish you, and to comfort you concerning your faith:

3 That no man should be moved by these afflictions: for yourselves know that we are appointed thereunto.

4 For verily, when we were with you, we told you before that we should suffer tribulation; even as it came to pass, and ye know.

5 For this cause, when I could no longer forbear, I sent to know your faith, lest by some means the tempter have tempted you, and our labour be in vain.

did, again and again—but Satan blocked our way. ¹⁹For what is our hope, our joy, or the crown in which we will glory in the presence of our Lord Jesus when he comes?c Is it not you? ²⁰Indeed, you are our glory and joy.

¹So when we could stand it no longer, we thought it best to be left by ourselves in Athens. ²We sent Timothy, who is our brother and co-worker in God's service in spreading the gospel of Christ, to strengthen and encourage you in your faith, ³so that no one would be unsettled by these trials. For you know quite well that we are destined for them. ⁴In fact, when we were with you, we kept telling you that we would be persecuted. And it turned out that way, as you well know. ⁵For this reason, when I could stand it no longer, I sent to find out about your faith. I was afraid that in some way the tempter had tempted you and that our labors might have been in vain.

In 2:1-16, Paul defended his past actions, but in 2:17-3:5 he defended his current absence from the Thessalonians. As before, Paul emphasized his love and relationship with them by calling them "brothers and sisters" (vs. 17). Paul's

feelings for the brothers and sisters in Thessalonica went beyond friendship and fond memories. Just as he hoped to encourage them, they were his encouragement as well. In looking ahead to the “Lord Jesus when he comes” (vs. 19), he anticipated later discussion of Christ’s return (1 Thess. 4:13–5:3; 2 Thess. 2:1-4).

Also, by calling the Thessalonians his “glory and joy” (vs. 20), Paul communicated their high value to him. Because of his absence, some may have begun to wonder whether Paul really cared about them. Paul wanted to erase all doubts about his love for them.

In 3:1-5, Paul repeats that he “could stand it no longer” in order to show his concern (vss. 1, 5). By this time, those in Thessalonica already knew that he sent his fellow missionary Timothy to them. Paul conveyed his depth of concern and that sending Timothy was costly to himself and his work (“left by ourselves in Athens” [vs. 1]). He provided Timothy’s qualifications and, just as he gave thanks for their continued faith, he expressed his own desire to encourage and strengthen the church in the face of persecution. He reminded them that their affliction was not a surprise.

For Paul, just as his thankfulness for the Thessalonian brothers and sisters was rooted in their faith, so too was his overriding concern for their faith. Particularly in times of trouble and trial, we need to be encouraged. We need to know that we are on the right path, even if it is rocky and hard one. Paul didn’t want persecution to cause his Thessalonian brothers and sisters to doubt or deviate from the faith. So he does what he can by sending Timothy “to strengthen and encourage [them] in [their] faith” (vs. 2).

6. *What does Paul mean by saying that the Thessalonian believers are his hope, joy, and crown?*

7. *What is the significance of Paul’s referring to Timothy as a “co-worker in God’s service” (1 Thess. 3:2)?*

Support Groups Encourage

Access to Christian support groups is essential for those facing life's troubles. Those burdens might be a recent divorce, recovery from drug-abuse, struggles with single-parenting, death of a loved one, mental illness, or being a victim of violence, to name only a few. Our hurdles are often unexpected and leave a person feeling alone, hopeless, and helpless. Support groups counter those feelings with hope and answers. As Scripture says, "Though one may be overpowered, two can defend themselves. A cord of three strands is not quickly broken" (Eccl. 4:12).

Seeking professional help and support groups are often stigmatized in the Black community, especially for mental health. Either the help is not available or the Black community does not use the assistance that is available. La'Shay Crayton, student founder of Black Christian Therapy, writes on her website, "I saw all too often through data and experience the barriers Black folks have when accessing adequate mental health care."

Christian support groups lift up the broken hearted, putting them in a room with others in similar situations. They provide space for sharing and growth. Support groups are for encouraging, admonishing, comforting, and assisting one another.

As Crayton says, "We do not believe spirituality and cognitive behavior therapy has to be at odds. Thus our website is dedicated to highlighting the way the two are one." It is fine to face your trials with others—as a matter of fact, it is healthy.

8. *How does Ecclesiastes 4:12 help to explain the way that Christians can support one another?*

9. *What support groups does your church have now? What are some you could start?*

10. *Why do you think some hurting people do not desire fellowship when they are in pain?*

Fellowship through the Trials

Too often we feel we have to endure the struggles of life alone. We don't want to bother anyone; we don't want to be the talk of the town. But Galatians 6:2 says, "Carry each other's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ." Being in a true fellowship of believers like the Thessalonians had can help us weather the storms that come and go in our lives.

► *Commit today to helping one another with the trials and troubles you are experiencing. Let everyone in your group sign your book as a reminder that we are one in the Spirit and one in the Lord when it comes to facing the struggles of life.*

KEY VERSE

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—1 Thessalonians 2:13, KJV

And we also thank God continually because, when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as a human word, but as it actually is, the word of God, which is indeed at work in you who believe. —1 Thessalonians 2:13, NIV

DAILY BIBLE READINGS FOR NEXT WEEK'S LESSON

Week of August 5 through August 11

(See *The Quiet Hour* and *Cross devotionals* on these passages.)

- Mon.** 2 Corinthians 5:16-21—The Love of Christ Compels Us.
- Tues.** Deuteronomy 6:4-13—Love the Lord Your God.
- Wed.** James 2:8-13—Fulfill the Royal Law of Love.
- Thurs.** John 13:31-35—Love One Another.
- Fri.** Zephaniah 3:14-20—Renewed in Love.
- Sat.** Jeremiah 31:1-9—An Everlasting Love.
- Sun.** 1 John 3:1-10—God's Beloved Children.