

**Core Seminar**

**Suffering for the Glory of God**

**Class 7: Fighting for Faith (Part 2)**

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***Helping others fight for faith in the local church***

**Introduction**

Suffering is a battle for faith. That’s been a main point in every one of these classes so far. And so last week we discussed that fight at an individual level; today’s class is about helping *others* fight for faith—with a few comments about how you can *help* others help you fight for faith when you’re suffering.

Suffering is fundamentally a corporate thing. As Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 12:26, “If one part suffers, every party suffers with it; if one part is honored, every party rejoices with it.” Or think of the metaphor of the family. When your kid gets sick at 4AM for the third time that night, you rush in to help. Because you’re family. And yet we are bound in Christ in a way that is stronger even than blood. As a church, we suffer together.

So how can come alongside each other as we fight for faith? Fundamentally, it all comes down to our understanding of what it means to encourage each other. That’s what we’ll look at first, and then how that shows up in the ministry of the Word, of prayer, of hospitality, and of presence. So first, what does it mean to encourage?

1. **The ministry of encouragement**

What is encouragement? A pat on the shoulder? A kind word? A listening ear? Yes—but in the Bible, it’s also more forceful, more goal-oriented, more invasive than that.

Take a look on your handout at Hebrews 3. The author warns us in verse 12: “Take care, brothers, lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God.” The context is a lesson drawn from Israel’s rebellion in the wilderness in the book of Numbers. The goal: faith. The opposite of unbelief. Now, how do we fight for faith? Verse 13. “But exhort one another every day, as long as it is called ‘today,’ that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin.” (**Heb. 3:13**).

OK. What does encouragement have to do with unbelief? How does it keep someone from being hardened by sin’s deceitfulness? Well, if you’re talking about surface-level “hope you feel better” encouragement, it doesn’t much. Instead, I think that this passage should redefine encouragement for us. The goal of encouragement is faith. And when we encourage someone, we spur them on in faith. That’s one insight I want you to take away from this passage. The goal of encouragement isn’t simply to make someone feel better; it is that they might believe the promises of God. And so correction, comfort, and warning are all included. This is encouragement with teeth!

Of course, the corollary is also true, which is a second insight here. When someone is struggling, even warning and correction are to be done in a way that encourages them toward faith. The goal, after all, as we see in verse 14, is a faith that perseveres. With our suffering brothers and sisters, we want to “hold our original confidence firm to the end.”

If time:

I think instead that we often underestimate how corporate our struggle for faith really is. Take Ephesians 4, for instance (turn there if you have a Bible). I want to give you an end point in Paul’s flow of thought, his starting point, and the chain of logic that gets there. So first, look at verse 14 for the end point. “Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunningness and craftiness of men in their deceitful scheming. Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into him who is the Head, that is Christ.” What is that ultimate goal? A good one-word summery is *faith*. No matter what circumstances buffet, no matter what people around us may say, we stand firm. That’s the end point. What’s the starting point? Go back to verse 7. Christ. His grace is the starting point. Now, how do we get from start to finish? It’s an important chain of logic that I want you to follow. First, verse 11, Christ gives us ministers of his word: apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, teachers. And they protect our faith, right? No: verse 12, they prepare us for works of service. Why? Because in doing those works of service, the body of Christ is built up in unity, verse 13—and we become mature. And that’s finally what leads us to verse 14. Christ. Gives us teachers. Whose teaching equips us to serve. So that in caring for each other we grow in unity. And in that unity we have faith. The struggle for faith in Ephesians 4 is fundamentally corporate. Not: “it’s really nice to have other Christians alongside you.” But “absent unity, your faith will die.”

I love how our former pastor Michael Lawrence put it in a parallel passage on Colossians 2:

“To some extent, the post-modernists are right. There is a social character to knowledge, a community aspect to our perception of reality. That’s why culture is so powerful. It shapes our perception of what is true, what is plausible. In a fallen world, culture becomes a plausibility structure for unbelief, for the denial of God and the exaltation of self. That is why the apostles are so concerned about the unity of the local church. The church is a counter-culture, an alternative plausibility structure for faith. God didn’t create us to exist in isolation, and he didn’t save us to believe in isolation. The unity of the church, down through history, and in every location, is meant to preserve the truth and to strengthen us in our own certainty. Together, we remind each other that Christ is the treasure that surpasses all earthly treasures. When fine-sounding arguments come along, when the pull and tug of this world in its wisdom is felt, left to ourselves we are as vulnerable as Eve. Together, as Paul points out, our faith is firm and well-ordered.”

The integrity of your faith needs others around you believing the same things, living them out, so that faith continues to be plausible.

So faith is the goal. Encouragement the means. How do we do that? There are three categories in 1 Thessalonians 5:14 that I often find useful. “We urge you, brethren, admonish the unruly, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, be patient with everyone (NASB).”[[1]](#footnote-1) At times, a Christian really is unruly. They are on a path to destruction and must be admonished and warned. In times of suffering, this might look like someone whose lack of faith is hurting themselves and others, who is acting like the Proverbial fool. Then there’s that big middle category. “Encourage the fainthearted.” That’s often where we live with those who are suffering. Their faith is timid. They need us to spur them on, to remind them of the truth of God’s promises, and to strengthen their faith. Then there is the category of the weak. The word “help” literally means “hold onto.” It’s the same word that we see in Titus 1:9 where an elder is to “*hold firm* to the trustworthy word as taught.” Those who are chronically in need are not to be abandoned, but held on to. And no matter the category, we must always act in patience.

When you’re helping someone who is suffering, running through these three categories in your mind is hugely helpful to determine a Godly response. Is someone lashing out in anger toward you when you’re trying to help? Before admonishing them, think for a moment. Are they truly unruly? Or are they timid, struggling to trust—and what you’re seeing is the sinful, ugly, and bitter side of that? The best response may be a gentle one of encouragement. And as they see your intent to hold up their faith you may well see their heart soften, their angry words taken back with remorse, and real work toward faith commence.

Encouragement toward faith. That’s our job as a church for those who are suffering. So next time you’re sitting with someone who is undergoing difficulty, let me make this your job description. Strengthen their faith. Either by admonishing them, spurring them on, or holding onto them. Let me draw out a few implications for sufferers and those trying to help them, and then we’ll look at some specific categories of encouragement.

*For Those Suffering*

1. Be honest. Suffering can be lonely. And there’s nothing that makes a lonely person feel better than someone else magically appearing, reading their mind, and encouraging them. Problem is, while that might sound great in your imagination, it doesn’t work very often in the real world. If you’re suffering, you need to be encouraged toward faith. And so you’ll need to be honest about your struggle. If you paint a happy, rosy picture of your life and deny that painful circumstances are making faith challenging, it’ll be really hard for anyone to minister to you as Paul intends in 1 Thessalonians 5.
2. Don’t make the conversation only about you. Sometimes the best thing for you is to hear your friend talk about *their* faith and what’s encouraging them spiritually.
3. Be open to reproof. That’s a hard pill to swallow when you’re suffering. But if suffering *is* a struggle for faith, and the enemy of faith is *sin*, then sometimes what you need—even in the midst of suffering—is for a Christian friend to tell you the hard truth about sin patterns in your heart that are keeping you from suffering well.

*For Those Helping*

1. Remember that suffering is a struggle for faith. There are all sorts of good things you can do for your suffering friend. But most important is to ask them about their faith, and to buttress that faith with the truth of the gospel.
2. Be patient, as Paul commands us. Especially as suffering drags from days to weeks to months to years, resist the urge to give up or become annoyed. As we read in Galatians 6:9, “Let us not grow weary of doing good, for in due season we will reap, if we do not give up.” *Hold on* to these weak ones as God’s precious children.
3. Find the same struggle for faith in your own heart. Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 10:13, “No temptation has overtaken you that is not common to man.” That is profound. Every temptation . . . is common. Even the temptation to murder, at least in miniature, is something we’ve all struggled with. You can say “but for the grace of God there go I” not out of false humility but because every struggle for faith you observe in your suffering brother or sister is resident at some level in your own heart. So from your own experience you can point them toward faith. And from your own experience you can speak in humility.
4. Don’t assume that your friend doesn’t know the answer. Nine times out of ten, you won’t help your suffering friend by telling them something they don’t know—but by simply reminding them of what is true and showing that *you* believe it. In fact, sometimes you’re best off just listening. Your friend will get around to saying what they need to hear about God—better than you can.

OK. So that’s the Biblical idea of encouragement. Encouraging toward faith. How do we do that? Let’s consider the ministry of the Word, of Prayer, of Hospitality, and of Presence.

1. **The ministry of God’s Word**

Our key verse last week was Romans 10:17: *faith comes from hearing and hearing through the word of Christ*. True for you—but also true for the one suffering beside you. Later on in the book of Romans, Paul writes this:

“We who are strong have an obligation to bear with the failings of the weak, and not to please ourselves . . . For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, that through endurance and through the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope.[[2]](#footnote-2)”

That’s our model. Use the Scriptures to give each other hope. That’s how we can help those who are weak. Read the Bible to those who are suffering. Offer to memorize passages with them that seem significant in this struggle. Sing the truths of the faith with them. Share stories of God being faithful to the promises of Scripture in your own life. Uphold their faith with the Bible.

Of course, Scripture brings faith not only by holding out God’s promises of life, but by shining light on pockets of unbelief in our hearts. When you get the sense that sinful, worldly attitudes are obscuring God’s promises in someone’s struggle for faith, hold out Scripture as a mirror to show them the problem in their heart.

I’ll tell you what this looks like for me. It doesn’t often look like rebuke and confrontation. Even though I’m often using Scripture to gently redirect someone’s thinking, it is more through probing and questions. I find myself sitting with someone and listening to them pour out their heart. For a long time. I may ask a few questions along the way to understand what’s going on inside, but I’m not speaking much. But let’s say as they’re talking, I hear something that sounds like, say, self-reliance, or some kind of idol, or a hint that they’re struggling to trust God’s goodness in this situation. Perhaps one of the unbiblical responses to suffering that we talked through the other week. Well, then, I’ll ask more questions to ferret out what’s going on in their heart—where they are tempted to fear or to doubt. And then we go to the Scriptures so they can begin to see these things themselves.

As I’ve thought about it, I think that 90% of the time, I’m going back to just one of four themes in Scripture when I seek to encourage those who are suffering:

1. I remind them that God will do them good through this suffering. Not simply once they get through it and get “back on track” with their lives, but right now. Romans 8:28 is helpful here. (“And we know that for those who love God, all things work together for good…”)
2. I remind them that God’s plans really are good. For them. Sometimes what I hear is a bit of a “God’s gonna getcha” fear. Like now that he took away this thing in my life, nothing’s safe. And so I use Scripture to remind them of how careful God is with them. Passages like Luke 12:32 (“Fear not, little flock, for it is your Father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom.”)
3. I remind them that God is in control. As we said earlier, his wounds are the surgeon’s careful scalpel. Exactly as far as is needed, and no further. The closing chapters of the book of Job are helpful. Or Psalm 56: “You have kept count of my tossings; put my tears in your bottle. Are they not in your book?”
4. I remind them that this world is passing away. Sometimes what is most helpful is to fix your gaze on our eternal state, and the slowly roll back your vision to today’s circumstance. Revelation 22 is so useful to remind us of what is real and lasting. Or 1 Peter 1, that talks about an inheritance that “is imperishable, undefiled, ad unfading, kept in heaven for you.”

And honestly, I find that I rarely stray from those themes. If you become knowledgeable about Scripture passages that deal with those four themes, you will be well-positioned to help your Christian friend struggling through trial.

Of course, timing is important. Proverbs 27:14, “Whoever blesses his neighbor with a loud voice, rising early in the morning, will be counted as cursing.” We need to be mindful of what people are able to hear in a particular moment. Even Jesus withheld some things until His followers would be able to bear them[[3]](#footnote-3).

The Bible is *the* tool in our struggle for faith. To comfort and to exhort. As I hope that when you encourage those who are suffering, speaking the Scriptures is a big part of it.

1. **The ministry of prayer**

One of the things we can *always* do with those who are hurting is to pray. It’s our first response—not a last resort. God always gives good gifts in response to prayer[[4]](#footnote-4) - and so we make specific and bold requests[[5]](#footnote-5).

Now sometimes, the good gift that God gives is relief from suffering. In **James 5**, we’re told, “Is anyone among you sick? Let him call for the elders of the church, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord. And the prayer of faith will save the one who is sick, and the Lord will raise him up. And if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven.[[6]](#footnote-6)” Other times the gift God gives in response to prayer is not relief, but perseverance. After Paul prays three times for the ‘thorn in the flesh’ to be taken away, God’s answer was, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.[[7]](#footnote-7)”

Whatever the case, when we pray, God uses those prayers to strengthen faith. No matter the circumstances, we can always pray! When someone is too weak, too distracted, too hurt to pray themselves, we can pray for them—which I think is exactly what’s going on in James 5. We can do it in our private prayers *and* we can pray with them on the spot. Instead of telling someone, “I’ll be praying for you,” (and, of course, forgetting to do that) just ask, “Can I pray for you right now?”

What do we pray for someone who is suffering? Well, as we talked about last week, we can pick a Psalm and use that to guide our prayer. Or, we can take the prayers of Paul in the New Testament as an example:

* When he prays for the church in Ephesus, he prays that God would help them see
  + “the hope to which He has called [them]”
  + “The immeasurable greatness of his power toward us who believe[[8]](#footnote-8)”
  + “the breadth and length and height and depth[[9]](#footnote-9)” of the love of Christ
* When he prays for the church in Colossae, he prays that they would
  + “be filled with the knowledge of His will”
  + “increasing in the knowledge of God”
  + and “have all endurance and patience with joy[[10]](#footnote-10)”
* When he prays for the church in Thessalonica, he prays that God would
  + “make you increase and abound in love for one another”
  + and “establish your hearts blameless in holiness[[11]](#footnote-11)”

No matter what we use as our guide, the Apostle John reminds us, “And this is the confidence that we have toward him, that if we ask anything according to his will he hears us.” (**1 Jn. 5:14**).

1. **The ministry of hospitality**

We sometimes think of hospitality as the same as entertaining. But the Biblical idea is quite broader than that—and deeper than that. The word *xenophile* that we translate hospitable literally means being a lover of strangers, and so the Biblical category includes not just opening our homes to others, but our lives as well[[12]](#footnote-12). Loving someone in very practical ways simply because we have been loved by God. Now, meeting practical needs (food, clothing, shelter, friendship) might seem out of place in a discussion on fighting for faith, but it actually plays an important role.

Think of **1 Kings 19.** Elijah has just seen God send fire from heaven and expose the prophets of Baal as frauds—perhaps the most amazing event of his life. But instead of celebrating, he’s fleeing for his life. Alone in the wilderness, he falls into a deep depression, and asks that God would kill him. And what does God decide to do? Rebuke him for his lack of faith? Remind him of his promises? No: **v5-6,** “And behold, an angel touched him and said to him, ‘Arise and eat.’ And he looked, and behold, there was at his head a cake baked on hot stones and a jar of water. And he ate and drank and lay down again.”

God’s provision of faith is a warm meal and a nap. So often, our struggle for faith has at its root our own physical fatigue. Can I say that again? Sometimes you’re struggling for faith because you’re sick and haven’t slept in a week. As simple as that. So hospitality is critical. When someone has a new baby, loses a loved one, or struggles with sickness, we can help their faith by fixing a meal, mowing the lawn, babysitting the kids, paying the bills, and doing the laundry. Meeting physical needs *is* a help to faith. (More on that next week.)

1. **The ministry of presence**

Have you ever been in a situation where someone’s hurting, you want to encourage them, but you just don’t have the right words? Sometimes that’s because there *are* no words. Think of the book of Job. After Job lost his family, home, and health, his circumstances were shocking. When Job’s friends first arrived, they had what we might call, the *ministry of presence*. They didn’t hold a Bible study, didn’t ask any questions, they simply put their arm around their friend and wept with him. Job 2:13, “And they sat with him on the ground seven days and seven nights, and no one spoke a word to him, for they saw that his suffering was very great.”

Job’s friends were a superb comfort…until they opened their mouths[[13]](#footnote-13). Especially after real calamity, just being with someone can be the best help to their faith. You don’t need to find answers to their questions; you don’t need to come up with the brilliant insight that will carry them through. Just sit, perhaps reading a few Psalms, pray by yourself and with them. And let the warmth of your relationship be their comfort.

**Conclusion**

The Word. Prayer. Hospitality. Presence. All ways in which we can encourage our suffering brothers and sisters so that they will not have “an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God.” That’s how we struggle together as a body. Perhaps as we pray as a whole church on Sunday night, perhaps in a small group, perhaps over lunch as one sister encourages another. We are not intended to bear our burdens alone; we suffer together so together, we can hold onto our faith.

1. I use the NASB here because it does some of the interpretation for us. ESV has “idle” instead of “unruly.” The context is Paul warning the Thessalonians against being idle. So bridging to a more general context, Paul is saying to admonish those who deliberately disregard Biblical teaching. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Rom. 15:1, 4 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. John 16:12 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Matt. 7:11 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Heb. 4:16 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Ja. 5:14-15 [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. 2 Cor. 12:9 [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Eph. 1:18-19 [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Eph. 3:18 [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Col. 1:9-11 [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. 1 Thes. 3:10-13 [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. 1 Pet. 4:8-11; Rom. 12:9-13 [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Job 42:7-8 [↑](#footnote-ref-13)