

## **This Is Needed**

### ***How Valuable Is Encouragement?***

When the Lord called me into the ministry at the age of twenty, I really didn't know what that meant. I wasn't sure how I could possibly fit into that sort of a vocation, and I didn't feel like the type who ever would. The pastor of my church embraced me though, encouraging me to pursue the calling. He even took me to a Christian conference several hundred miles away so I could learn about Christian colleges and find one that fit. I might not have ever become a pastor if it wasn't for the encouragement of Pastor Frank Jackson. I remember the exact moment I met Mary Jo. I had just started attending the largest church I had ever been a member and the singles group was having a meeting to select leaders. There were over a hundred singles in the church, and I had only been with them for two months and barely anyone knew me. Out of nowhere, someone nominated me for the position of ministries coordinator. I was stunned and for several moments sat in silence. Mary Jo turned around, smiled at me, and mouthed that I should accept the nomination. Her encouragement was the beginning of an incredibly fruitful ministry I had there. Encouragement has played a huge part in my life and much of what I have done and attempted was because someone encouraged me to try. How important is encouragement to you? The big idea I am going to share with you is: Encourage others as you would like to be encouraged.

We are considering for the next several weeks some rather unknown people in the Bible who had a bigger place in the history of the nation of Israel and the birth of the Church than perhaps you have considered. Before Israel had a king, there was great chaos among the Tribes. Unity between them based on faithfulness to God was splintered. In many regions, wickedness prevailed, and the people lived like the pagans surrounding them. Over the course of the four hundred years between when Joshua led the entire nation to when Saul became its first king, men and in at least one case, women tried to fill the leadership vacuum. Known as judges, they were mostly warrior chieftains, judges such as Samson and Gideon among them. Not extremely spiritual, they periodically rose to power and raised armies to fight against the oppression neighboring nations brought. One such judge was Ehud who helped Israel defeat the Moabites. For several years, the people faithfully served the Lord, but it didn't last. **After Ehud died, the Israelites once again did evil in the eyes of the Lord. So the Lord sold them into the hands of Jabin, a king of Canaan, who reigned in Hazor. The commander of his army was Sisera, who lived in Harosheth Haggoyim. Because he had nine hundred iron chariots and had cruelly oppressed the Israelites for twenty years, they cried to the Lord for help.** (Judges 4: 1-3 NIV) Take note. The oppression the Israelites suffered was the direct result of God working out of them their lawlessness and wickedness.

In contrast to nearly all of the other judges, the LORD raised up one who was faithful to God and listened attentively to Him. During the spiritual darkness, the LORD surprisingly called a woman to turn things around. **Deborah, a prophetess, the wife of Lappidoth, was leading Israel at that time.** (Judges 4: 4 NIV) She was famous among the people of northern Israel for her spiritual gift. She knew how to handle disputes. **She held court under the Palm of Deborah between Ramah and Bethel in the hill country of Ephraim, and the Israelites came to her to have their disputes decided.** (Judges 4: 5 NIV) She was a sort of Moses, calling the people, one by one back to the laws of God. By doing so, she was changing the spiritual climate of the nation. With a growing devotion to the LORD among the people, God decided it was time to release them from the oppression. The terrifying Canaanites were going to be driven from the land and the LORD had someone in mind to lead the armies of Israel. Remember that God works in flesh and blood, works in and through people to accomplish what He wants done. So He told Deborah He had someone picked out to lead the armies of Israel against the Canaanites, a fellow about whom we know nothing. Barak. **She sent for Barak son of Abinoam from Kedesh in Naphtali and said to him, "The Lord, the God of Israel, commands you: 'Go, take with you ten thousand men of Naphtali and Zebulun and lead the way to Mount Tabor. I will lure Sisera, the commander of Jabin's army, with his chariots and his troops to the Kishon River and give him into your hands.'" (Judges 4: 6-7 NIV)**

So there you have it. Deborah, knowing the mind of God, gave the Lord's instructions and of course, Barak courageously went out the door and gathered an army. That, however, is not the way the account reads. It is funny how reality does not always fit the way we think things should go. Rather than boldly marching off to battle, Barak begged Deborah to go with him. He clearly believed he couldn't do it without her. **Barak said to her, "If you go with me, I will go; but if you don't go with me, I won't go."** (Judges 4: 8 NIV) Deborah wasn't impressed. She informed Barak that she would go with him but because of his approach to the orders from God, Barak would not get the credit

he should have had for the victory. Now, despite Barak demanding Deborah support him in leading the army, it was still Barak's army to command. Notice what was said about the Hebrew forces. **When they told Sisera that Barak son of Abinoam had gone up to Mount Tabor, Sisera gathered together his nine hundred iron chariots and all the men with him, from Harosheth Haggoyim to the Kishon River.** (Judges 4: 12-13 NIV) Do you see that? Even though Deborah joined him, the army was still Barak's. Despite Deborah's clear leadership skills, she did not try to take over for the general. Instead she encouraged Barak to live up to his calling. **Then Deborah said to Barak, "Go! This is the day the Lord has given Sisera into your hands. Has not the Lord gone ahead of you?" So Barak went down Mount Tabor, followed by ten thousand men.** (Judges 4: 14 NIV) Rather than criticizing Barak for his reticence at taking over leadership of the army because Barak was apparently not qualified, Deborah encouraged him to pursue this dream.

Encouragement is so rare we all tend to embrace it when we experience it. A word of encouragement has kept some hopeful in the darkest of times, even staved off suicide. It is hard when there is no one encouraging you. The Apostle Paul even found it tough to bear. **At my first defense, no one came to my support, but everyone deserted me. May it not be held against them.** (2 Timothy 4: 16 NIV) Job practically begged for someone to encourage him as he went through his suffering, but no one was there for him. Encouragement is at least in the top ten of what is needed to have a healthy personality, free of depression, despair, and disillusionment. Not all encouragement, however, is the same. Most encouragement, although nice to hear and uplifting has no lasting impact on you. For encouragement to transform you, it needs the supernatural backing of God. Deborah was not just casting out willy-nilly positive vibes. There was divine substance to her encouragement. **"The Lord has given Sisera into your hands so go!"** You can go out fearlessly with hope for success because God has your back...and your front. He is with you!

Have you ever needed to hear that? God is with you! Perhaps you didn't believe it. Maybe you thought it was a fairy tale. The power of the personality behind the words make them come alive, give you a purpose, a direction even if you feel like you are going nowhere. The supernatural backing of God behind encouragement is the dynamite that breaks apart the empty feeling you have when it seems you are just not worth it. There are four key elements to supernatural encouragement. 1. There is a clear understanding God is behind what you are saying. 2. It uplifts the one who receives it. 3. It produces Godly fruit. 4. It brings healing and restoration. The ones who have meant the most to you and you remember fondest are probably those who encouraged you. Over forty years ago, an elderly woman who I barely knew, before I went away to college gave me a small book of Bible promises and told me how proud she was of me and that I would make a great pastor. How about you? Do you have any memories like that?

Those who do the most to change the course of history for the good of us all are not the shakers and doers but the encouragers who made it clear to the shakers and doers that they were embarking on a noble cause and that they were loved and valued. I have often wondered if David's mother had something to do with David's decisive determination to fight Goliath. Was she the encourager behind his courage? Let me share the opening lines to the history of Moses's life and I believe it is breathtaking in its value to you and me. **Now a man of the house of Levi married a Levite woman, and she became pregnant and gave birth to a son. When she saw that he was a fine child, she hid him for three months. But when she could hide him no longer, she got a papyrus basket for him and coated it with tar and pitch. Then she placed the child in it and put it among the reeds along the bank of the Nile.** (Exodus 2: 1-3 NIV) Did you catch that? Moses's mom saw that Moses was a fine child! Does that not absolutely elevate one's life if that person has someone who sees him or her in that way? Although Moses was eventually raised by Pharaoh's daughter, for perhaps three years as Moses's mom nursed him, she most likely poured that view of Moses into him so that even at a young age, encouragement filled his soul.

If the most you have ever done is encourage another person, you have made something of your life. You have lived well. God declares that encouraging others is a top priority of every Christian. **Therefore encourage one another and build each other up, just as in fact you are doing.** (1 Thessalonians 5: 11 NIV) The big idea is obvious. Encourage others as you wish you were encouraged. There are a thousand ways to encourage someone. A smile at just the right moment, an honest compliment, a retelling of someone else's compliment, a Bible promise to claim, a supporting declaration, a pat on the back or a hug, a promise to help, a stated belief in the abilities of the one you are encouraging. Encourage someone today. Set a goal to in some way encourage others five times this next week and pray as you do so that the Lord will make His home in them and be a "friend who sticks closer than a brother."