

**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 **corporately helping *others*** fight for faith—with a few comments about how you can helpothers 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 member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice together.”** Think of the metaphor of the family. When your kid gets sick at 4AM for the third time that night, you still rush in to help—because you’re family. And yet we are bound together in Christ in a way that is stronger even than blood. So, as a church, we should suffer together.

So how can we come alongside each other as we fight for faith? Basically, 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?**  In the Bible, it’s an active, forceful, and goal-oriented endeavor.

In **Hebrews 3:12**, the author warns us, **“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 is faith, the opposite of unbelief.

Now, how do we fight for faith? On your handout, see **Verse 13**, where we are urged to take action, **“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.”**

What does encouragement (exhortation) have to do with unbelief? How does it keep someone from being hardened by sin’s deceitfulness?

**The goal of encouragement is faith.** And when we encourage someone, we spur them on in faith. The goal of encouragement is not merely to make someone feel better (though that can be a very good thing); it is that they might believe the promises of God. Depending on the circumstances, that *could* also include correction, comfort, and warning.

Warning and correction can actually be a part of encouragement. But especially when someone is struggling, we want to remember that we need to seek to correct **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.”**

So, faith is the goal, and encouragement is the means**.** How do we do that? There are three categories in **1 Thessalonians 5:14** that I think you will find useful:

**“We urge you, brethren, admonish the unruly, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, be patient with everyone (NASB).”[[1]](#footnote-1)**

1. Unruly. At times, a Christian may be unruly. They are on a path to destruction and should 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 fool in Proverbs.
2. Faint Hearted. Then there’s that big middle category—encouraging 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.
3. The Weak. 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 can be hugely helpful to determine how to respond in a godly way.

* 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 with someone who is in a difficult season, 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 (Handout)***

1. Be honest. Suffering can be lonely, and there can be great comfort when someone comes along, understands without being told what is going on, and encourages them. But truly, it is rare that others have such extreme insight into our hearts without being told. We need to be honest about our struggles so that others can encourage us. If you paint a happy, rosy picture of your life and deny that painful circumstances are making faith challenging, it will be difficult for anyone to minister to you as Paul intends in 1 Thessalonians 5.
2. Don’t feel like the conversation only has to be about you. Sometimes the best thing for us is to hear a friend talk about *their* faith and what’s encouraging them spiritually.
3. Be open to reproof. That will be 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 *may* need—even amid suffering—is for a Christian friend to tell you the hard truth about the sin patterns they see and that are keeping you from suffering well. **(“Faithful are the wounds of a friend” -Prov 27:6.)**

***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 perhaps most important is to **ask them** about their faith, and to reinforce that faith with the truth of the gospel in their life.
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, “*And let us not grow weary of doing good, for in due season we will reap, if we do not give up*.”** Hold on to your brother or sister, who in this season feels weak.
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 even 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 rather because every struggle for faith you observe in *your* suffering is present in *your own* heart. So, from your own experience you can point others toward faith reminded of that—and from your own experience you can speak in *humility*.
4. Don’t assume that your friend does not know the answer. Most the time, we will not help our suffering friends by telling them something they do not already know—but instead by **reminding them** of what is true and **showing that *we* believe it**. Other times we are best off just listening. Our friends will get around to saying what they need to hear about God—often better than we can.

*Summary:* 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.

[Questions]

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—and also true for the one suffering beside you. Later in **Romans 15**, 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 **bringing to light** areas of unbelief lurking in our hearts. When you get the sense that sinful, worldly attitudes are obscuring God’s promises in someone’s struggle for faith, allow the truths in Scripture to illuminate problem areas in their heart.

[Teacher testimony: I can tell you what this has looked like for me when some brothers in our church walked with me through an extremely difficult season. While there easily could have been rebuke in light of the plain text of Scripture to correct my thinking, their care so much more often sounded like gentle, probing questions so they could try to understand what was going on in my heart. And they listened with deep care. And when they heard what sounded like self-reliance, idolatry, or struggling to trust God’s goodness in this situation, they would ask more questions to get to what was going on in my heart. And then we could go to the Scriptures so that I could begin to see these things myself.]

If you are walking through something like this with a brother or sister, let me offer four themes in Scripture that may be an encouragement:

1. Remind them that God will do them good through this suffering. Not simply once they get through it and “back on track” with their lives, but He will do good right now. **Romans 8:28** is helpful here. (“*And we know that for those who love God, all things work together for good…*”)
2. Remind them that God’s plans really are good for them. Some people are prone to fear that because God took away this one thing in their life, nothing is safe any longer. If that is the case, you can 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. Remind them that God is in control. 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. Remind them that this world is passing away. Sometimes what is most helpful is to fix our gaze on our eternal state, and the slowly roll back your vision to today’s circumstance in light of that fact. **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.*”

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 and tactfulness 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 whether people will perceive your care and love as obnoxious in a particular moment. (Even Jesus withheld some things until His followers would be able to bear them[[3]](#footnote-3).) **What might be an example of our attempt to love being received as obnoxious?**

God’s Word, 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 one of our first responses—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 instead 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.

Consider 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? Last week we suggested using a Psalm and to guide our prayer. We also can take the prayers of Paul in the New Testament.

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**

**What is Hospitality?** Often conflated with “entertaining.” But the Biblical idea is quite broader and deeper than that. Where in the Bible do we see the term “hospitable”? We see it in **1 Timothy 3:2** and **Titus 1:8** (elder qualifications—and, my implication, should mark all Christians), where the word “philoxenon” (what we would call “xenophile”—a *lover* of strangers). **Romans 12:13**, exhorting all Christians similarly “philoxenian”, show hospitality.

The Biblical category of hospitality 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 can play 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. But God does not rebuke him for his lack of faith nor remind Elijah of His promises. No, instead, in verses 5-6:

***“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 can be a warm meal and rest for the weary. Often, our struggle for faith has, at its root, physical fatigue. As a practical matter, if you’re sick and haven’t slept in a week, fighting for the faith is all the harder. It may not be the only reason, but it very well can be a major reason—I know that has been true in my life. So, hospitality can be critical to helping a suffering soul.

When someone has a new baby, loses a loved one, or struggles with sickness, we can help their faith by providing a meal, babysitting the kids, paying the bills, or doing the laundry. Meeting physical needs *is* a help to faith. And the beautiful thing about hospitality for the Christian is that it does not have to be someone you know! (i.e. Member Care!)

1. **The Ministry of Presence**

Have you ever been in a situation where someone is hurting, and 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 be there and let the warmth of your relationship be their comfort. That may open the door to other ministries (scripture, encouragement, etc.).

**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 that 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 (“I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now.”) [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Matt. 7:11 (“If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask him!”) [↑](#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)