

Preface

The Greek word that is often translated “encouragement” is *parakaleo*. When you trace the word’s usage, you start to see that encouragement is like fuel for the Christian life.

In the Old Testament, God puts courage into his people by reminding them of his presence, promises, and purposes, and they in turn pass that courage to one another. Moses and the Lord both tell Joshua, “Be strong and courageous” (Deut. 31:7–8; Joshua 1:9). Jonathan “strengthened [David’s] hand in God,” (1 Samuel 23:16). The prophets pair exhortation with comfort (Isaiah 40:1, Haggai 2:4-5). Wisdom literature highlights the power of encouragement (Proverbs 12:25).

The New Testament pictures a community where people keep putting courage into one another—comforting the weary, correcting the wandering, and spurring each other on to love and good works. Bible scholar Murray Harris said, “Encouragement is one of the most important ministries in the church of the New Testament.”

This devotional is an invitation into this life-giving ministry. We will reflect on Scripture, learn the patterns of wise speech, and practice simple habits that build others up.

WEEK ONE The Ministry of Encouragement

The clearest place that we are told to encourage one another is in Thessalonians: “Therefore encourage one another and build one another up, just as you are doing” (5:11). We are going to spend this week looking at each part of this verse. We will see that this is a command, not a suggestion. We will also see whatever God asks of us; he empowers us to do. Like any ministry, this one requires intentionality and persistence. May the Lord teach and inspire us this week!

Week One Assignment: Keep An Encouragement Log

The goal of this assignment is to become more aware of how important encouragement is, for you and for others. Every day this week, take a moment to reflect on things that people have said that encouraged you, and things you have said with the aim of encouraging others. Then write down the people and the words that were spoken. Keep a daily log.

- Give thanks for how God has blessed you and used you.
- Reflect on missed opportunities and consider what held you back.
- Ask God for more awareness and intentionality with people.

SEPTEMBER 1 The Command

“Therefore encourage one another and build one another up, just as you are doing” (1 Thessalonians 5:11).

Paul not only encouraged the Thessalonians in his letters; he also commanded them to encourage one another. Two key examples are at the end of 1 Thessalonians 4 and the beginning of chapter 5.

Some were grieving the loss of Christian friends and family, so Paul taught on the hope of resurrection in Christ. The passage ends with a command: “Encourage one another with these words” (1 Thessalonians 4:18). He doesn’t want them simply to cheer each other on. He wants them to speak “these words” to each other. We will see over and over that biblical encouragement is grounded in the truth of the gospel. The good news people need is the good news about Jesus.

The beginning of chapter 5 is about the Day of the Lord, a warning about judgment, and an exhortation to live in light of Christ’s return. It builds to this incredible word of good news: “For God has not destined us for wrath, but to obtain salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, who died for us so that whether we are awake or asleep we might

live with him” (1 Thessalonians 5:9–10). And again, he follows the proclamation of the gospel with this command: “Therefore encourage one another and build one another up, just as you are doing” (5:11).

The core meaning of the Greek word (*parakaleo*) is “to call to one’s side,” or “to come alongside someone.” Depending on the context, it may be translated as *encourage*, *urge*, *comfort*, *exhort*, or *appeal*.

When the word is translated “encourage,” as it is in 1 and 2 Thessalonians, it means to strengthen someone in their faith; to give them courage; to help them trust God and live for him. In his book on encouragement, Larry Crabb says, “it is the idea of joining someone else on a journey and speaking words that encourage the traveler to keep pressing on despite obstacles and fatigue.”

For the Christian, the journey is following Jesus. All the way to the end. The witness of Scripture is that we will not make it to the end alone – we must come alongside and encourage one another.

SEPTEMBER 2 Reasons & Resources

“**Therefore** encourage one another and build one another up, just as you are doing” (1 Thessalonians 5:11).

“Therefore” is an important word. It tells us that there are reasons and resources for encouragement. We find both in the preceding verses: “For God has not destined us for wrath, but to obtain salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, who died for us so that whether we are awake or asleep we might live with him” (1 Thessalonians 5:9–10).

The command to “encourage one another” is grounded and empowered by this truth: Jesus died for us so that we can truly live.

We typically think of encouragement as giving a kind word or a compliment, something to lift the spirits. That is a type of encouragement, which we could certainly use more of. However, what Paul is talking about here reaches deeper.

The reason for encouraging someone is not something that originates in them or in us. It is not simply that they need or have earned an encouraging word, nor is it that we are just nice and supportive people. All of that may be true, but beyond that, the reason we ought to encourage one another is because we have the best news the world has ever heard! The gospel means there is always a reason to speak words of comfort and hope. It isn’t contrived. It isn’t keeping things positive. It is good news in any and every circumstance. Ray Ortlund said in a sermon, “Encouragement is what the gospel feels like as it moves from one person to another.”

We not only have a reason to encourage one another; we also have the resources to do so. Whatever God asks us to do is always based on what he has done for us in Christ. We can come alongside one another because Jesus has come alongside us. Jesus was “made like his brothers in every respect, so that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people. For because he himself has suffered when tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted” (Hebrews 2:17-18).

Through the ministry of the Spirit, the new life we have received in Christ becomes in us a wellspring of life-giving words for those around us. Jesus said: “If anyone thirsts, let him come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, ‘Out of his heart will flow rivers of living water’” (John 7:37–38).

The *why* and *how* of encouragement is found in the gospel of Jesus. We must come back to this starting point every day. Again and again, we come to Jesus and drink, and he fills us up to overflowing.

SEPTEMBER 3 A Ministry Mindset

“Therefore **encourage one another** and build one another up, just as you are doing” (1 Thessalonians 5:11).

Encouragement is not just a nice thing to do; it is a ministry that we have to one another. To do it well, we must have a ministry mindset.

To “set your mind on” something means to put it at the center of your thoughts and desires (Romans 8:5, Colossians 3:2). It is your basic orientation in life.

Our mindset determines how we show up. For example, a consumer mindset shows up to church thinking things like: *What will I get out of this? What do people think of me?* A ministry mindset shows up asking: *What can I contribute? How can I serve and bless others?* You can see how the way we show up can lead to very different experiences.

A simple but fruitful practice is to say a short prayer before you show up to a conversation or a gathering: *Lord, make me quick to listen and slow to speak. Help me understand what people are going through and what they need. Give me words that will help people draw near to you.* That little prayer goes a long way because it gets you in the right mindset.

In Philippians 2, Paul says: “If there is any encouragement in Christ...” – If Jesus has come alongside you, then have this mindset among yourselves – “in humility count others more significant than yourselves ... look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others” (Philippians 2:1-5).

I have a friend who shows up this way. He pays attention to what people are saying and he responds in simple ways, but with sincere faith that God is at work. One time I shared with our small group a recurring dark thought I had been having. After the discussion, we all prayed together for various things.

My friend was sitting on the other end of the couch, and he reached around and put his hand on my shoulder and prayed for me. He prayed specifically for the thing that I shared. He spoke gospel truth into my heart. It was simple, but it felt like the power of God was coming through his hand into my body. It was one of the most encouraging things I have experienced, and it helped me greatly. I had been having that recurring thought for a while, and I don't think I ever had it after that moment.

We can all do this for each other. It just takes a moment to shift your mindset.

SEPTEMBER 4 Upbuilding

“Therefore encourage one another and **build one another up**, just as you are doing” (1 Thessalonians 5:11).

The purpose of encouragement is to build up. That seems obvious, but it is worth reflecting on this image.

Peter says we are like “living stones, being built up as a spiritual house...” (1 Peter 2:5). Paul uses the same image: “You are ... members of the household of God, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone, in whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord. In him you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit” (Ephesians 2:19-22).

We are God's building, which is built on the foundation of the gospel. But the structure grows ... we are “being built up together ... by the Spirit.” The question is: How does the Spirit build the household of God?

The answer in Ephesians 4 (switching from building to body imagery) is that “speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love” (Ephesians 4:15–16).

The body “builds itself up in love” through the words we speak to one another. The emphasis in this passage is strengthening one another in the truth of God's word. It is encouragement in the form of exhortation and teaching.

Encouragement is not simply making people feel better. It is building them up in faith. Later in this chapter, we can see the practical application of the image. “Let no corrupting talk come out of your mouths, but only such as is good for building up, as fits the occasion, that it may give grace to those who hear” (Ephesians 4:29).

Corrupting talk is linked to rotten fruit. Words that are not aimed at the good of others (e.g., idle words and selfish conversation) leaves a bad taste and has a negative impact on people.

Words that are “good for building up” are words that “fit the occasion,” which is to say, they are thoughtful of others and what they are going through. When we pay attention to what people are thinking and feeling, and we speak God's truth into that, it “gives grace to those who hear.” That is how we build one another up.

SEPTEMBER 5 More & More

“Therefore encourage one another and build one another up, **just as you are doing**” (1 Thessalonians 5:11).

If the Thessalonians were already encouraging one other, then why did Paul tell them to encourage one other? I can see two reasons. First, our natural drift is toward self-focus. Even when we are doing well, we need to be reminded to stay on that path. Second, the work of encouragement never ends.

In the way that children know their parents love them, but also need to hear it repeatedly, people always need encouragement. Your friends need encouragement today and they will need it again tomorrow. The same goes for your parents, kids, spouse, co-workers, and pastors. And for you.

The ministry of encouragement never stops. “Now concerning brotherly love, you have no need for anyone to write to you, for you yourselves have been taught by God to love one another, for that indeed is what you are doing to all the brothers throughout Macedonia. But we urge you, brothers, to do this more and more” (1 Thessalonians 4:9–10).

For those who are doing well, the charge is to see the ongoing need and continue encouraging them. For those who are not doing well, the challenge is to be patient. “And we urge you, brothers, admonish the idle, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, be patient with them all” (1 Thessalonians 5:14).

We are not typically drawn to people like this – the idle, fainthearted, and weak. We like to help people, but this group needs continual help. We like to say a good word to someone, but this crowd requires sustained attention. We like to solve problems, but their situation might be complex and hard to figure out.

It takes spiritual stamina to keep coming alongside the idle, fainthearted, and weak. At times it feels like your words aren’t making a difference. It’s tempting to be frustrated with them, or give up on them, but Paul says, “be patient with them.”

Patience believes that God is at work. Like a farmer sows his seed and tends the soil, we do the work of encouragement because we know that God uses it to cause the growth. We remember how God has been patient with us, and his patience supplies ours.

SEPTEMBER 6 Barriers

Even though encouragement is important, and we all want to be encouraged, we have to be reminded and instructed to do it.

There are lots of things that we believe and desire but struggle to do in our actual lives. Things like prayer, exercise, and generosity are all good examples. There are barriers that keep us from doing what we want to do.

What are the emotional and spiritual barriers that keep us from encouraging one another?

Spiritual barriers have to do with the forces of evil at work in the world. One way the enemy stifles encouragement is by making it feel awkward. Have you ever noticed that sometimes it feels difficult to encourage someone?

- We feel unsure if we should say something, even when it is a compliment.
- We have a hard time receiving encouragement.
- We don’t know exactly what to say, so we say nothing.
- It feels vulnerable to encourage someone.
- We think maybe we shouldn’t encourage someone because it will tempt them to be prideful.
- We think it is not our place to teach, admonish, exhort, etc.
- We have a disproportionate fear of how people might respond to these things.

It is perplexing that something we all want can be so awkward. What is going on in these moments?

At a personal level, we hide behind these barriers to protect our image, cover our insecurity, and mitigate the risk of rejection. At a cosmic level, dark powers are at work in the world to keep our relationships on the surface.

The enemy stokes our pride and fear so that we shrink back from opportunities to speak truth in love. Instead of encouraging one another, we fill the space with humor, small talk, dishonesty, and power plays.

We tend to think the solution to surface community is sharing more honestly about our lives. That is part of the solution, but the other part is speaking more honestly into each other's lives. Anyone can be vulnerable, but "encouraging one another and building each other up" in Christ is a distinctively Christian practice.

SEPTEMBER 7 Reflection & Recap

At the end of each week, we are going to reflect on what we have learned and experienced.

Let's start with your assignment this week, the encouragement log:

- What words have stuck with you this week? Why?
- Have you felt a lack of encouragement from others, or in your community? Can you bring that to God?
- What have you enjoyed about being more intentional in your encouragement of others?

Now let's pull together some action steps from our reading:

- Accept the weight of the command. It's not a suggestion. "Encourage one another."
- Remember the gospel. It is the motivation and power for the ministry of encouragement.
- Show up to things. Church. Small group. Social settings. Be present. It's the only way to come alongside people.
- Show up with a ministry mindset. Say a prayer before conversations and meetings, asking God to use you.
- Show up with an openness (and desire) to be ministered to by others.
- Share what you are learning in God's word.
- Help people apply God's word to their situations.
- Don't grow weary of encouraging others. Even if you keep saying the same things to people, they never stop needing to hear it.
- If you see something good in someone, tell them. Even if it feels awkward or you don't know exactly what to say.
- When someone encourages you, do not deflect. Thank them and tell them what it means to you.
- If you see something wrong or destructive in someone, tell them (graciously). Correction is one of the ways we build each other up.

WEEK TWO Paul's Example of Encouragement

Paul practiced what he preached. In all his letters, he encouraged the church. He usually began this way, but it was not a formality. It was foundational to his goal of building people up. We are going to look at Paul's example in five of his letters. We will see how to speak into very different situations, various ways to encourage people, and how to cultivate a culture of encouragement in your community.

Week Two Assignment: Write Words of Encouragement

Every day this week, send someone a written word of encouragement. It could be anything from a text to a letter (envelope, stamps, and whatnot).

Written encouragement is powerful:

- First, we tend to be more thoughtful and thorough in writing. People can feel it, and they are grateful that you took the time to communicate in this way.
- Second, people can reread it and let it really sink in. If someone sends me an encouraging text, I read it more than once. I have kept and reread notes from people that date back two decades. It always encourages me.

On some days this week we will focus on a specific way to encourage others. Try to incorporate that as you think about what you might write to someone.

SEPTEMBER 8 Corinthians: Encouraging People Who Have Issues

Even in places like Corinth, where there were many serious problems, Paul looked for ways to encourage them. It raises a question: How do you encourage people who are in sin?

Paul focused on what God had done and will do for them: God gave grace to them in Christ (1 Corinthians 1:4). God blessed them with spiritual gifts (1 Corinthians 1:5-7). God will sustain them until the end, so that they will be blameless when Jesus returns (1 Corinthians 1:8).

We often think of encouragement as recognizing good behavior. Here, it is recognizing the grace of God, reminding them of God's goodness and mercy toward them in Christ.

Paul's example teaches us three things:

1. There is always a way to encourage brothers and sisters in Christ. Even if they are entangled in sin, we can set our minds on the grace of God and remind them that God is faithfully at work in their lives.

It is counterintuitive. We think reminding people of God's grace will only encourage them to keep sinning, but the opposite is true. Grace sets us free from the power of sin (Romans 6:1-4; 8:1-4). God's kindness leads to repentance (Romans 2:4).

2. Encouragement is not a formality. It is a ministry. When we are reaching for things to say or trying to put a positive spin on things, that can feel patronizing. Paul is not trying to build "an encouragement sandwich." He is building them up in faith.

The specific things that he mentions in the verses above are related to the correction and instruction that follows in the rest of the letter. They need to make some changes, but the motivation and power to make those changes is rooted in what God has done for them. This is how the gospel works.

3. Encouragement does not mean blanket approval. Sometimes we withhold encouragement because we don't want people to think they are "all good." We think that if we encourage one area of their life, they will think they are off the hook in other areas. Paul shows us how encouragement can work in partnership with confrontation, rebuke, and admonishment.

The ministry of encouragement is proactive and intentional. When grounded in the gospel, it can change people.

SEPTEMBER 9 Philippians: Encouraging People Who Are Doing Great

Whereas the Corinthians were struggling, the church in Philippi was thriving. It is often said to be the healthiest church in the New Testament, and that is based in part on Paul's gushing affection for them.

From beginning to end, Paul expresses his love for them

- "I thank my God in all my remembrance of you, always in every prayer of mine for you all making my prayer with joy, because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now. And I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ. It is right for me to feel this way about you all, because I hold you in my heart, for you are all partakers with me of grace, both in my imprisonment and in the defense and confirmation of the gospel. For God is my witness, how I yearn for you all with the affection of Christ Jesus" (Philippians 1:3-8).
- "Therefore, my brothers, whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, stand firm thus in the Lord, my beloved" (Philippians 4:1).

This letter shows us the importance of encouraging those who are doing well, not just those who are struggling. Those who are doing well still need fuel to keep going.

Again, let's note three things we can learn from Paul's example:

1. Don't assume people know how you feel about them. Tell them. Paul clearly felt blessed and encouraged by the Philippian church. Every time he thought about them, he felt joy and gratitude for them. And we know that because he told them (1:3-4). He loved them, and he told them (4:1). He felt cared for by them, and he told them (4:10,18). If anyone has blessed you in some way, tell them.
2. When we encourage others, we point them to God's faithfulness. They were doing good work, and that was cause for thanksgiving (not pride), for it is God who began the good work in them. They were running well, and that was cause for hope (not pressure), for God will bring to completion the good work he has begun.
3. Encouragement is not just giving thanks. It is also spurring people on. This church was thriving, but they were not done growing. Paul prayed that their "love would abound more and more" (1:9). He exhorted them to humility and unity (1:27, 2:5). He challenged them to press on to know Jesus more (3:12,17). He counseled them in how to deal with anxiety (4:6).

It is easy to overlook people who are doing well. But, they are still on the journey, and everyone on the journey needs others to come alongside them. They need affection. They need to be reminded of God's grace. They need to be challenged.

SEPTEMBER 10 Thessalonians: Second-Hand Praise

"You became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia. For not only has the word of the Lord sounded forth from you in Macedonia and Achaia, but your faith in God has gone forth everywhere, so that we need not say anything. For they themselves report concerning us the kind of reception we had among you, and how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God" (1 Thessalonians 1:7-9).

One way to encourage people is to tell them what you have heard from others. That's what Paul does here.

Paul and his companions, Silas and Timothy, planted this church but had to leave sooner than expected because of persecution. They fled to Berea (Acts 17:10), which was also in Macedonia. From there, Paul went on to Athens and Corinth, which were in Achaia (Acts 17:16, 18:1). Silas and Timothy stayed back but later caught up to Paul in Corinth (Acts 18:5). They likely brought a report to Paul about what was happening in Thessalonica and how their faith was having a ripple effect throughout the region.

It was while Paul was in Corinth that he wrote this letter. I can imagine his concern for them, especially given his hasty departure. But then, during his missionary travels, Paul began to hear people talking about the Thessalonians – how they had "received the word in much affliction, with the joy of the Holy Spirit" (1 Thessalonians 1:6).

Stories of what happened in Thessalonica got around, and as others followed their example, Paul heard about it. Then the stories were confirmed by the report from Timothy and Silas. In 1 Thessalonians 3:6, Paul mentions that “Timothy has come to us from you, and has brought us the good news of your faith and love and reported that you always remember us kindly and long to see us, as we long to see you.”

Paul encouraged them by simply sharing what he has heard about them.

If you have received this kind of secondhand encouragement, then you know how effective it is. It helps you realize that you really are making a difference. For example, it is good when I encourage my kids, but perhaps they expect that from me. If I tell them something good that another parent observed in them, that honors and builds them up in a different way.

It's simple, but powerful: if you hear something good about someone, tell them what you heard. It will uniquely bless them.

SEPTEMBER 11 Colossians: Praying for People

“And so, from the day we heard [of your faith in Christ Jesus], we have not ceased to pray for you...” (Colossians 1:9).

The Colossian church has a great backstory. Paul was ministering in nearby Ephesus, where a young man named Epaphras heard the gospel and began following Jesus. Epaphras took the gospel to Colossae – *maybe his hometown?* — and that is how the church began there (Colossians 1:8). Paul did not plant this church, but he rejoiced in their faith all the same. And he wrote this letter to them.

How do you encourage people you don't know personally? You pray for them. After sharing the report from Epaphras, Paul told them they have been praying for them, and then he shared some of the things they were praying:

“And so, from the day we heard, we have not ceased to pray for you, asking that you may be filled with the knowledge of his will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, so as to walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him: bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God; being strengthened with all power, according to his glorious might, for all endurance and patience with joy; giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of the saints in light. He has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins” (Colossians 1:9–14).

This is just one of many prayers in Paul's letters, but it is a great example of things you can pray for people:

- To have spiritual discernment in understanding God's word so they can walk in his ways.
- To grow in their knowledge of God, and that their knowledge would bear fruit in good works.
- That they would be strengthened by the power of the Spirit to endure trials with patience and joy.
- That they would be full of gratitude for God's grace toward them in Christ.
- That they would know who they are in Christ: delivered from darkness, redeemed and forgiven, heirs to the kingdom.

Praying for people builds them up, even if they don't know you are doing it, because God works through our prayers. To take it a step further, you can pray for them in person or tell them what you are praying for them.

Prayer is not only a form of encouragement; it stimulates words of encouragement. When you pray for people, you are more hopeful for them and more aware of how God is at work in their lives. And, therefore, more likely to encourage them in what you see.

SEPTEMBER 12 Romans: Mutual Edification

“First, I thank my God through Jesus Christ for all of you, because your faith is proclaimed in all the world. For God is my witness, whom I serve with my spirit in the gospel of his Son, that without ceasing I mention you always in my prayers, asking that somehow by God’s will, I may now at last succeed in coming to you. For I long to see you, that I may impart to you some spiritual gift to strengthen you— that is, that we may be mutually encouraged by each other’s faith, both yours and mine” (Romans 1:8–12).

Paul wanted to go to Rome, not only to preach the gospel there, but to be with the people. He wanted to use his gifts to strengthen them in faith, and he wanted to be encouraged by their faith.

What stands out to me is how forthright Paul is. He says: *I have gifts that can benefit you, and I’d like to see you so I can make you stronger.* I think many of us would be hesitant to say such a thing. It sounds presumptuous. But for Paul, it was a matter of truth and stewardship. God gave him gifts – as he does with all of us – and he was intentional about using them.

I also love Paul’s humility. He was an Apostle, so it makes sense that he had something to give. But he also wanted to receive something from them. He wanted to be encouraged by their faith, and he told them that. That kind of invitation changes the way people show up for each other. It might feel odd to tell someone you want to come over so you can encourage them and be encouraged by them, but it would set a different tone for your time together.

It makes me wonder how you could make this the expectation for your Gospel Community – that when you show up together, there is a desire and an invitation to mutual edification.

That would change the quality of conversation: more honesty, more stories about how God is at work in our lives, more interest in others, more listening, more thoughtfulness about how to build people up. Just a little more intentionality and humility would go a long way.

SEPTEMBER 13 Romans: Public Praise

“Greet Apelles, who is approved in Christ. Greet those who belong to the family of Aristobulus. Greet those in the Lord who belong to the family of Narcissus ... Greet Rufus, chosen in the Lord; also his mother, who has been a mother to me as well. Greet Asyncritus, Phlegon, Hermes, Patrobas, Hermas, and the brothers who are with them. Greet Philologus, Julia, Nereus and his sister, and Olympas, and all the saints who are with them” (Romans 16:10, 13-15).

Romans is Paul’s theological masterpiece, so you would expect the last chapter to be something like the grand finale of a fireworks show. Instead, Paul mentions about 30 people you have never heard of. It is so ordinary.

As far as I can tell, most of the people that Paul mentioned in Rome were not professional Christians. They had jobs and families and all the normal stuff. And most of them were not mentioned for things they had done. They were simply brothers and sisters in Christ. And yet, Paul includes them by name.

It feels good to be mentioned. Many years ago, I wrote a book on community. I spent nearly a whole chapter talking about people in my community, even though they would not appear again in the book. One editor commented that the chapter didn’t make sense and felt like a bunch of personal shoutouts. I agreed but kept all of it anyway. They were unknown to my readers, but it was ordinary people like them who were shaping community and mission in my world.

I don’t know what Paul’s motives were, but I imagine it was something similar. Publicly mentioning people conveys gratitude and honor. Look how Paul describes them: *sister, brother, servant, saints, patron, fellow workers, fellow prisoners, beloved, approved in Christ, elect, a mother to me.*

Not all encouragement should be public, but this is another way to build people up. Talk about people in front of others. Mention them. Give thanks for them. Acknowledge their faithfulness. Commend their character. Celebrate their fruitfulness. You can just say how much you like them. Not only does it feel good; it cultivates a culture of encouragement. I think this is what Paul had in mind when he commanded them earlier to “love one another with brotherly affection. Outdo one another in showing honor” (Romans 12:10).

SEPTEMBER 14 Reflection & Recap

As we did before, let's reflect on the reading and assignment from this week.

Did you write words of encouragement to people this week?

- Did it feel awkward? If so, why do you think that is?
- What did you enjoy about doing this?
- How did people respond?

Drawing from Paul's example, here are more ways you can practice encouragement in daily life:

- Remind people of what God has done and how you see him working in their lives.
- Don't withhold encouragement just because they have other issues.
- Give thanks for people, privately and publicly.
- Tell people that you like them and enjoy them and care about them.
- If you hear something good about someone, tell them what you heard.
- Pray for people, privately and directly. Tell them what you are praying for them.
- Set the tone for mutual encouragement in your relationships.
- Speak well of people in front of others.

WEEK THREE: Wisdom from Proverbs

The book of Proverbs is about getting wisdom so you can live a fruitful life. The wise person discerns how God has designed the world to work, and lives accordingly. Wisdom begets fruitfulness in every area of life – money, family, work, relationships, and – you guessed it – in what we say. A major theme in Proverbs is the speech of the wise, and by contrast, the words of a fool. We will reflect on the power of our words and where they come from. Then we will focus on more ways that we can speak words that give life.

Week Three Assignment: The Tongue Exercise (taken from Sonship by Jack Miller)

This week, try to live by these five laws:

1. Do not gossip or repeat negative information about anyone. Rather, speak well of others.
2. Do not complain or grumble about anything. Instead, give thanks in all things.
3. Do not blame-shift or make excuses. Own your mistakes and confess your sins.
4. Do not defend yourself or make excuses. Accept critique with humility.
5. Do not boast about anything in yourself. Boast in your weakness and need.

Every day this week, review these five laws and journal about how you did. *What laws did you break? Why do you think that happened? What does it reveal about your heart?*

The point of this exercise is to consider the power of the tongue and our inability to control it. James said, “No human being can tame the tongue. It is “a restless evil, full of deadly poison” (James 3:8).

This is a sobering exercise, but if you let it drive you to Jesus, he can change your heart. And when your heart changes, your words follow suit. As Jack Miller used to say: “Cheer up! You’re a worse sinner than you ever dared imagine, and you’re more loved than you ever dared hope.”

SEPTEMBER 15 The Power of the Tongue

“Death and life are in the power of the tongue...” (Proverbs 18:21).

That is a strong statement, but a little survey of Scripture affirms the power of words.

- “The universe was created by the word of God” (Hebrews 11:3). The refrain in Genesis 1 is, “God said ... and it was so” (Genesis 1:3-24). “The word of God is living and active” (Hebrews 4:12).
- Jesus is the “Word made flesh” (John 1:14). The words he spoke were “spirit and life.” (John 6:63)
- The gospel comes to us through hearing “the word of truth.” (Colossians 1:6, Romans 10:14,).
- Our words have the power to set our whole life on fire (James 3:5-6).

This is wisdom for those who can see it. Our words matter. When we speak, we unleash the potential for good and evil into the world: blessing and cursing, building up and tearing down, righteousness and injustice, truth and falsehood. This is why David prays: “Set a guard, O LORD, over my mouth; keep watch over the door of my lips!” (Psalm 141:3).

We can attest to the truth of this proverb by reflecting on our own experiences. We have received words of encouragement that have strengthened us, lifted our spirits, comforted us, steered us back on the right path, helped us make decisions, and brought joy to our lives. These are life-giving words!

We have also had other kinds of words spoken to us: words that brought us down, discouraged us, stifled us, dismissed us, made us anxious, made fun of us, patronized us, and hurt us. These are death-dealing words. They may not kill us, but they unleash a world of pain and destruction.

“A gentle tongue is a tree of life, but perverseness in it breaks the spirit” (Proverbs 15:4).

The sheer volume of words in daily life desensitizes us to their power. We say things like “Talk is cheap,” but Proverbs says that words of knowledge “are a precious jewel” (20:15). We are going to dig deeper into “the tongue of the wise” this week, but our starting point is to sober up about the potential our words have for life and death.

SEPTEMBER 16 Death-dealing words

“Negativity bias” is the term psychologists use to explain why we tend to notice, remember, and give more weight to negative experiences than to positive ones. Negative cues fire faster and stick longer, making it easier to say what’s wrong than to affirm what’s good. “Bad” information feels more urgent, memorable, and worth passing along. Lying is easier than honesty. Gossip feels good even when we know it isn’t. Perverse speech is socially rewarded.

Proverbs has much to say about the types of death-dealing words that are so common in our world.

False words. None of us think of ourselves as liars, but when it comes to protecting our image, avoiding a hard conversation, or getting what we want, we are quick to shade and spin, exaggerate and withhold, flatter and manipulate. Even though these things may feel harmless, they bring ruin.

“Whoever speaks the truth gives honest evidence, but a false witness utters deceit” (Proverbs 12:17).

“Truthful lips endure forever, but a lying tongue is but for a moment” (Proverbs 2:19).

“Lying lips are an abomination to the LORD, but those who act faithfully are his delight” (Proverbs 12:22).

Gossip & Slander. Negativity bias plus the thrill of “inside info” makes gossip feel urgent and satisfying. “The words of a whisperer are like delicious morsels; they go down into the inner parts of the body” (Proverbs 26:22). But whatever gain we feel in the moment quickly gives way to ruined reputations and relationships.

“A dishonest man spreads strife, and a whisperer separates close friends” (Proverbs 16:28).

“Whoever covers an offense seeks love, but he who repeats a matter separates close friends” (Proverbs 17:9).

“Whoever goes about slandering reveals secrets; therefore, do not associate with a simple babblers” (Proverbs 20:19).

Deceit. Perverse words overturn what is right, calling evil “good” and vice versa. Crooked speech twists what is true, usually to self-protect. Devious speech talks sideways, to manipulate or insinuate. All of these forms of speech flow from a heart that is turned in on self.

“A worthless person, a wicked man, goes about with crooked speech, winks with his eyes, signals with his feet, points with his finger, with perverted heart devises evil, continually sowing discord” (Proverbs 6:12-13).

“Put away from you crooked speech and put devious talk far from you” (Proverbs 4:24).

Negativity bias tracks with the biblical diagnosis that sin has corrupted our hearts, polluting the fountainhead of speech (Matthew 12:34). So we pray with David: “Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me” (Psalm 51:10).

SEPTEMBER 17 Healing Words

“There is one whose rash words are like sword thrusts, but the tongue of the wise brings healing” (Proverbs 12:18).

Reckless words are compared to sword thrusts – repeated, piercing damage. A contemporary phrase captures the idea: *His words went right through me*. Sometimes I say: *that was a punch in the gut*. Thoughtless words can hurt, which is why we compare their effect to physical pain.

Wise words function like medicine for the soul. They soothe the pain and mend what has been torn. We say things like: *That was a balm to my soul*. Healing words often arrive gently: an apology, a reminder of truth, a patient explanation. To the shamed woman, Jesus said: “Go in peace” (Luke 7:50). To the grieving father: “Do not fear, only believe” (Mark 5:36). To Peter in his failure: “Feed my sheep” (John 21:17).

Death-dealing words have wounded us, but life-giving words can heal us. Consider these examples of healing words in everyday situations:

Soft words. When someone wounds us, our inclination is to defend and retaliate. A wise person knows how to promote healing by diffusing the situation. “A soft answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger” (Proverbs 15:1).

Good words. All around us, people are wrestling with anxiety. They are worried about money and relationships. They are fearful of unknowns. They are burdened by the state of things. If we are paying attention, we can speak into the unrest. “Anxiety in a man’s heart weighs him down, but a good word makes him glad” (Proverbs 12:25).

Kind words. It’s so easy to fill conversations with sarcasm, coarse joking, and approval seeking. It is all a form of taking from others, but we can never get enough of what we are looking for. These conversations leave everyone involved feeling a little empty. But one kind word can change a person’s disposition. “Gracious words are like a honeycomb, sweetness to the soul and health to the body” (Proverbs 16:24).

Hard words. To be clear, healing words are not just “nice” words. Sometimes they sting, like the sting of medicine or the pain of resetting a bone. If a brother or sister is drifting from the right path, they need to be warned. If they have blatantly sinned, they need to be rebuked. It will not feel good in the moment, but it will work for their good in the end. “Better is open rebuke than hidden love. Faithful are the wounds of a friend; profuse are the kisses of an enemy” (Proverbs 27:5–6).

If you listen carefully, people are constantly telling you about their pain and heartache. When you hear it today, ask God to help you speak healing words into their lives.

SEPTEMBER 18 Timely Words

Life-giving words are timely words.

“To make an apt answer is a joy to a man, and a word in season, how good it is!” (Proverbs 15:23).

“A word fitly spoken is like apples of gold in a setting of silver” (Proverbs 25:11).

Wise people are not only thoughtful about what to say, but also **when** and **how** they say it.

You can say something true and good but at the wrong time. For instance, it is true that we are commanded to “count it all joy when [we] face trials” (James 1:2), but you would never say that to someone who has just received bad news. That is not the right word for that moment because it is not helpful. Pearls are pretty, but they are of no use to a pig (Matthew 7:6).

If you are not a morning person, you will appreciate this wise saying: “Whoever blesses his neighbor with a loud voice, rising early in the morning, will be counted as cursing” (Proverbs 27:14). An ill-timed word can do the opposite of what we intend.

You can also say the right thing at the right time, but in the wrong way. Emotional resonance matters. You would not celebrate with someone in a monotone voice or grieve with them in an upbeat manner. This is why Paul says, “Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep” (Romans 12:15).

Timely words begin with listening and observation. What is the person talking about? And what are they *really* talking about? What is their body language? What is the context? Are they hungry or tired or distracted? What do they want?

Sometimes I will ask my wife what she wants from me in a conversation. “Do you want me to listen and pray for you, or do you want me to solve a problem?” This helps her think about what she needs in the moment, and it helps me respond accordingly. If she wants compassion, and I map out a strategic plan on the whiteboard, that does not go well. But if I sit next to her and acknowledge the difficulty of the situation and pray for her, that is life-giving.

God can give us the wisdom we need to speak timely words. The prophet Isaiah said: “The Lord God has given me the tongue of those who are taught, that I may know how to sustain with a word him who is weary. Morning by morning he awakens; he awakens my ear to hear as those who are taught” (Isaiah 50:4).

As we sit with God daily, he can tune our ears and temper our pace so that our speech becomes fitting and fruitful.

SEPTEMBER 19 Persuasive Words

We have said that encouragement is not just about lifting the spirits. Sometimes encouragement has an element of teaching and persuasiveness. It is aimed at pointing people to Jesus and moving them along the path of discipleship. "The heart of the wise makes his speech judicious and adds persuasiveness to his lips" (Proverbs 16:23).

Persuasive speech is "sweet," which means gracious and kind. "The wise of heart is called discerning, and sweetness of speech increases persuasiveness" (Proverbs 16:21). It is also "soft," which means gentle. "With patience a ruler may be persuaded, and a soft tongue will break a bone" (Proverbs 25:15). When correction or teaching is delivered graciously and gently, it opens the heart up to receive it.

When it comes to persuasive speech, two things make all the difference: sincerity and patience.

Sincerity means we don't have ulterior motives. We genuinely want what is good for the other person. Any other motive flirts with flattery and manipulation. Flattery overstates virtues and successes to make people feel good, and sometimes to get their favor or approval. It might make them feel better, but it also makes them more vulnerable to blind spots and to the flatterer's control. "A man who flatters his neighbor spreads a net for his feet" (Proverbs 29:5). Manipulation goes a step further, intentionally using flattery and deceit for personal gain.

Sincere encouragement comes from the right place; a heart that is content with God and devoted to truth.

Patience is the other key. Moving people along in any direction, even a direction they want to go, requires patience. And frankly, most of us are too busy with our own problems and pursuits to sustain our attention on someone else for very long. We are in a hurry with people, which is one of the reasons we resort to speech that is not gracious and gentle.

When we grow impatient, we raise our voice, we get frustrated, we make demands, we try to force change. All of that undermines the thing God has given us to say. Gentleness and patience go together. "With patience a ruler may be persuaded, and a soft tongue will break a bone" (Proverbs 25:15). Softness is not weakness; it is focused strength. It is slow to anger and confident in the weight of truth.

Flattery and manipulation end in ruin, but good words that come from a good heart will yield good fruit. "He who loves purity of heart, and whose speech is gracious, will have the king as his friend" (Proverbs 22:11).

SEPTEMBER 20 Measured Words

"When words are many, transgression is not lacking, but whoever restrains his lips is prudent" (Proverbs 10:19).

I basically talk for a living. Even when I don't have to talk, I find myself talking. Sometimes I feel anxious at the end of the day, and it is because I have said so many words. It feels like I let out a swarm of bees and now I have no idea who got stung. I routinely say things that are unnecessary, self-promoting, incorrect, unhelpful, and even hurtful. It's not usually what I am trying to do, but "When words are many, transgression is not lacking."

Those who are more measured with their words listen before they speak and don't feel like they have to say everything that comes to mind. Simply put, they say less, which adds weight to what they do say. By my count, Proverbs has more to say about this than any other kind of speech. Let's consider two aspects of measured words.

Silence. It's almost comical the way Proverbs states it, but essentially, it's hard to go wrong if you just don't say anything. "Even a fool who keeps silent is considered wise; when he closes his lips, he is deemed intelligent" (Proverbs 17:28).

Some people hide behind silence and need to say more, but some of us just need to learn how to be quiet. If you have a history of saying things you shouldn't have said, listen to this wisdom: "If you have been foolish, exalting yourself, or if you have been devising evil, put your hand on your mouth" (Proverbs 30:32). We have talked a lot about what to say to people, but to be a good encourager, you must also learn what not to say. "Whoever belittles his neighbor lacks sense, but a man of understanding remains silent" (Proverbs 11:12).

Restraint. A few years ago, I noticed that I often wanted to say things before someone else said it so that I would get the credit. I interrupted people or finished their sentences. That is foolish. In fact, it is worse than foolish. “Do you see a man who is hasty in his words? There is more hope for a fool than for him” (Proverbs 29:20).

When we pour out words without thought, we expose the chaos within our own spirits. But when we speak with care and restraint, we reflect the character of our God, who is slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. “Whoever restrains his words has knowledge, and he who has a cool spirit is a man of understanding” (Proverbs 17:27).

Here's a helpful practice for those of us who tend to be hasty with our words: pause, pray, ponder, proceed.

SEPTEMBER 21 Reflection & Recap

Part of the way we get wisdom is by meditating on wisdom. So, let's reflect on what we have learned this week about life-giving and death-dealing words.

- What did you learn about yourself from the tongue exercise?
- What kinds of “death-dealing” speech come easiest for you (*lying, gossip, deceit*)? Why do you think that is?
- What life-giving words come easiest for you (*healing, timely, persuasive, measured*)?
- What is one way you want to grow?

Let's continue adding to our list of specific ways you can encourage people:

- Reflect on the power of words.
- Confess destructive speech.
- Ask God to purify and renew your heart.
- Speak with gentleness.
- Speak good news to anxious hearts.
- Replace corrupt talk with kind words.
- Speak hard words when needed, in love.
- Consider when and how you speak to people.
- Spur people on in faith and good works with sincerity and patience.
- Don't talk just to talk. Measured words have greater impact.

WEEK FOUR: Exhortation in Hebrews

Hebrews is a pastoral “word of exhortation” (13:22). It was written to people who were weary from religious persecution and cultural pressure. They wondered if it would be easier to go back to their old life. In this letter, the author comes alongside them to warn them about the dangers of abandoning faith and to exhort them to endurance.

Exhortation is a strong form of encouragement that might involve warning or teaching. Someone said it is “the truth pressed lovingly on the heart.” We see both elements in this letter. He teaches the truth by showing the supremacy of Jesus above all things, and then he calls people to hold fast to faith in Jesus.

This is not a pep talk. It is a sustained vision of the person and work of Jesus. *Because of what Jesus has done, you can keep going.* The writer not only exhorts his readers; he calls on them to do the same for one another. Perseverance in faith is a community project.

Week Four Assignment: Write a letter of exhortation & encouragement

1. Think of someone in your life who is weary or discouraged. Maybe they are struggling in their faith.
2. Ask them if they would be willing to share with you what they are experiencing, thinking, and feeling.
3. Seek to understand all you can about their situation and how they are processing it.
4. Write them a letter of exhortation and encouragement. Reflect on your conversation. Ask God to give you understanding and humility. Ask God what he wants you to say to them. Then write a letter, thinking about the kinds of things we will see in Hebrews this week.

**** Alternate assignment:** Ask someone to write you a letter of exhortation.

SEPTEMBER 22 Pay More Attention to Jesus

“Therefore, we must pay much closer attention to what we have heard, lest we drift away from it” (Hebrews 2:1).

Hebrews 1 is about the supremacy of Jesus over angels. The angels are ministering spirits, but God has spoken to us through his Son in a unique and superior way. “Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world” (Hebrews 1:1-2).

The teaching of Jesus and the good news about him is the ultimate revelation of God. It is his life-giving word. To drift away from what we have heard (the gospel) is to set ourselves on a course of death and destruction.

Biblical encouragement never floats on optimism; it stands on revelation. He doesn’t say, “you got this” or “I believe in you.” He doesn’t unveil a new insight that will take them to the next level. He tells them to pay more attention to what they have already heard about Jesus – his divinity, his humanity, his atoning sacrifice for sin, and his exaltation (1:3).

The gospel is not merely the entry point into the Christian life; it is the pathway. Paul said: “As you received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in him” (Colossians 2:6). Peter said that spiritual stagnation comes from forgetting what God has done for us in Christ (2 Peter 1:3-9). Believing the gospel is not a one-time event, but an ongoing means of transformation. If you try to move on from the gospel to something else, you end up drifting away from Jesus. To use a nautical image, people do not intend to drift. They just stop paying attention, and the currents carry them away. The remedy isn’t frantic rowing, but renewed attention. Find the fixed point, correct course, and stay focused on your destination.

Our fixed point is Jesus. The main goal of encouragement, then, is to remind people of the gospel.

- When we point people to Jesus, they remember that he is better than anything this world has to offer.
- When we remind people what Jesus has done for us, they are filled with gratitude and fueled by joy.

- When we remind them that Jesus is now sitting at the right hand of God as our advocate, they gain comfort in trials and confidence in prayer.
- When we call attention to the reality that Jesus is coming back to make all things new, they have renewed hope.

Helping people pay more attention to these things keeps them on the path of life and blessing.

SEPTEMBER 23 Shine the Light

“Take care, brothers, lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God. 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” (Hebrews 3:12-13).

Hebrews 3-4 is framed by the theme of “entering into God’s rest” (4:1). It is a way of talking about our salvation with an emphasis on enjoying God’s favor and stewarding his gifts. To boil it down further: true rest is being satisfied with God.

In this light, encouraging people means understanding what keeps them from being satisfied with God. Hebrews 3 answers the question bluntly: “So we see that they were unable to enter (God’s rest) because of unbelief” (3:19).

He was not talking about belief in God, as in his existence. He was talking about believing God, as in obeying his word because you trust him.

We all have gaps between what we say we believe and what our actions reveal about us. We say we believe that God is in control, but we try to take matters into our own hands. We say God provides, but we are anxious about money. These gaps represent ways that we are trying to build a life on our own terms, rather than trusting God.

Exhortation speaks into the gaps by shining a light on unbelief and pointing people to Jesus. We must resist the temptation to make excuses for people. The problem is not their circumstances or the craziness of the world. Our weariness and discouragement are, at least in part, because of our unbelief.

It is difficult to see these things in our own lives. That is why he calls on us to “exhort one another every day” (3:12). We have a mutual responsibility to speak into the gaps and point each other to repentance and faith. And apparently, there is opportunity to do this every day.

This is not a norm for most friendships or communities, but you can pave the way by going first. Ask your friends or small group to help you see the gaps in your life. Then ask them what they think it would look like for you to trust God in this area of your life.

They might feel awkward, so remind them what is at stake. This is to keep our hearts from being “hardened by the deceitfulness of sin” (3:13).

SEPTEMBER 24 Draw Near to God

Hebrews 1-2 highlights the importance of God’s word. Hebrews 3-4 warns about the danger of responding to God’s word with unbelief. Chapter 4 ends with a final warning and a final word of encouragement.

Here is the warning: “Let us therefore strive to enter that rest, so that no one may fall by the same sort of disobedience. For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart. And no creature is hidden from his sight, but all are naked and exposed to the eyes of him to whom we must give account” (Hebrews 4:11-13).

Do you hear the Genesis 3 language? When Adam and Eve sinned, they realized they were naked, they felt exposed before God, and tried to hide from him. But there was nowhere to go because “no creature is hidden from his sight.”

The word translated as *exposed* literally means “to twist the neck.” It was a word used to describe the way a soldier would stretch back the neck of his enemy to cut it (verse 12 invokes the sword imagery). This is a picture of judgment. God’s word judges and destroys those who turn against him.

That doesn’t exactly feel uplifting, but the warning sets up the encouragement in the following verses.

“Since then we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin. Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need” (4:14-16).

The priests mediated the presence of God to the people, but Jesus is the true and better high priest who gives us direct access to God. To give up on Jesus is to be cut off from the presence of God, but to believe in Jesus is to “draw near to the throne of grace.”

Notice the corporate language throughout: *Since **we** have a great high priest ... Let **us** hold fast ... Let **us** draw near ... That **we** may receive mercy.* This is something we call each other to, and something we do together.

Encouragement helps people draw near to God. When they feel exposed, we assure them there is mercy in the presence of God. When they are helpless, we tell them there is “grace to help in time of need.”

SEPTEMBER 25 Real Assurance

“Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the holy places by the blood of Jesus, by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain, that is, through his flesh, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water.” (Hebrews 10:19-22).

Picking up on the exhortation in chapter four to draw near to God with confidence, here we have “confidence to enter the holy places” and to “draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith.”

Why does he have to repeatedly urge us to do this? The implied answer is because we do not feel “fully assured” that our hearts are “sprinkled clean.” That is why he roots this exhortation in the person and work of Jesus.

Hebrews 9 and 10 explains that the rituals and sacrifices related to the Old Covenant were just symbols that pointed to the realities of the New Covenant.

- The priests entered “holy places made with hands,” but Jesus entered “into heaven itself” (9:24).
- The priest offered blood that is “not his own” (9:25), but Jesus offered “his own blood” (9:12).
- The temple sacrifices were offered repeatedly, but Jesus “appeared once for all at the end of the ages to put away sin by the sacrifice of himself” (9:26).

The imagery and symbolism are incredible. It’s not a story that anyone could make up, and certainly not a story that a first century Jew would want to make up. Even if it were possible to make it up, it’s not a story that anyone could step into and fulfill unless he knew every part of it. That is what Jesus has done.

The author of our faith has stepped into the story. The one who made the symbols became their true form. The God who demands a sacrifice became a sacrifice for us.

This is rich encouragement. If someone is weighed down by guilt, don’t tell them “It’s not a big deal.” That won’t work because they know sin is a big deal. Instead, assure them that Jesus really died for their sins. Help them walk in the assurance that faith brings (10:22).

A practical way to do this is to encourage faithful presence in church. Every time we gather for worship, we rehearse this reality: the curtain is torn, the way is clear, and our welcome rests entirely on Christ’s finished work.

SEPTEMBER 26 A Clear Conscience

“Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the holy places by the blood of Jesus, by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain, that is, through his flesh, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water” (Hebrews 10:19–22).

One of the main concerns in Hebrews 9-10 is our conscience, which is our inner moral awareness before God. We feel the weight of sin on our conscience, and that makes us feel unfit for God and for community. We think if people knew the real us, they would reject us. And we know God knows the real us, so we assume he is unhappy with us.

The problem of conscience is at the core of humanity, and we try to deal with it in all kinds of ways: religion, morality, random acts of kindness, and keeping things positive. None of it works because we can't escape the holiness of God.

The old covenant rituals could clean our bodies, but they couldn't “perfect the conscience of the worshipper” (9:9). The same sacrifices were made year after year, and the people came back year after year, because they didn't feel clean. Their conscience condemned them. The sacrifices were a constant reminder that they were not fit for God (10:3).

We need more than a ritual washing. We need to be cleansed deep down. This is the good news: The “blood of Christ ... purifies our conscience from dead works to serve the living God” (9:14). Because of Jesus, we can draw near to God “with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience” (10:22).

Sometimes people feel like they have to “clean up” before coming to God. That might mean going to church or quitting a bad habit or just doing better for a little while. The exhortation they need is to bring their accusing thoughts under Christ's finished work: be washed by his grace and draw near.

This kind of assurance deepens our relationships. When we know our conscience has been cleansed by Christ, we are freed from pretending and performing. We no longer need to hide behind polished images or constant self-improvement. Instead, we can confess sin honestly, forgive quickly, and extend the same grace we've received. A clean conscience before God creates a gracious posture toward people. Our confidence to draw near to God becomes a quiet courage to love and serve others without fear.

SEPTEMBER 27 Stir Up

“Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful. And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near” (Hebrews 10:23-25).

Verses 19-22 were about the good news that Jesus makes a way for us to come into God's presence, by giving us a clean heart and a clear conscience. Verse 23 exhorts us to “hold fast” to this. This is about persevering in faith, keeping our eyes fixed on Jesus until he comes.

How do we do that? The answer in verses 24-26 is: *by encouraging one another*. Every phrase in these verses tells us something important about the ministry of encouragement.

Let us consider ... The word means to give deliberate, thoughtful attention. As you think about the people in your life: *What are they going through? What do they need? How can you help them?* This kind of understanding requires asking questions and listening well, prayer and discernment, and intentional application. In other words, what your community needs will not happen casually or naturally. It takes purposeful focus on the spiritual good of others.

how to stir up one another to love and good works ... When people are discouraged, it is often because they are preoccupied with their circumstances and feelings. They need help shifting their focus to the glory of God and the good of others. The phrase “stir up” means to incite or provoke to action. It's like an alarm clock that wakes people up to the reality of God and his mission. When people feel sidelined, they need to get back in the game. That is what he is saying here: let's think about how we can keep each other in the game, engaged in community and on mission together.

not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some ... Meeting together guards against drifting, discouragement, and spiritual isolation. When we get together, we are nourished by God's presence. Moreover, it provides the context for coming alongside each other. In 30 years of ministry, my observation is that the healthiest and most fruitful Christians are those who are faithfully present over time. It's not because of anything dramatic. It is simply because we grow through our connection with the members of the body.

encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near ... our eyes are on "the Day" when Jesus will return. That is our hope we hold fast to. That is the destination of our journey together. We're almost there. Let us do all we can to help each other stay the course.

SEPTEMBER 28 Reflection & Recap

Assignment reflection:

- What stood out to you in your conversation?
- Do you feel like God gave you (or them) understanding and something to say?
- How did it feel to exhort someone? (or to be exhorted) Why?
- How did they receive your letter? (or vice versa)

Exhortation is a form of encouragement. Let's reflect on some key points of exhortation from Hebrews. These are things we can ask each other, say to each other, and help each other do.

- Pay more attention to Jesus. We never outgrow the gospel.
- Pay attention to the gaps between what you say how you live. That is where unbelief grows.
- What are you failing to believe about God? What would it look like to trust him in this?
- In what ways do you feel exposed or fearful? What would keep you from bringing these things to God?
- In what ways do you feel weighed down by guilt?
- Because of Jesus, you can always come to God. He will always forgive and help you.
- Is your conscience bothering you? Are there sins you want to confess?
- God can set you free from self-concern and help you live a life of love for others.
- I see God at work in your life. I see how he uses your gifts to bless others. You need to lean into that more.
- You seem to be gone a lot. I am concerned that it is not good for you, and it is certainly not good for us. You need community, and your community needs you.
- God will satisfy the deepest longings of our heart. It may not happen in this life, but we can wait. We can defer hope because we know that everything in the new world will be so much better than all we could imagine here.

The letter of Hebrews ends with a final word of exhortation, a call to exhort one another, and a word of hope.

"Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God" (Hebrews 12:1–2).

"Therefore, lift your drooping hands and strengthen your weak knees, and make straight paths for your feet... See to it that no one fails to obtain the grace of God" (12:12,15).

"Now may the God of peace who brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus, the great shepherd of the sheep, by the blood of the eternal covenant, equip you with everything good that you may do his will, working in us that which is pleasing in his sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory forever and ever. Amen" (Hebrews 13:20–21).