

LESSON 4

Encouraging One Another

Who comes alongside when we falter?

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. For we have come to share in Christ, if indeed we hold our original confidence firm to the end.

— Hebrews 3:12-14

Introduction

Movement One of this quarter closes here. Three lessons have pressed inward. How the church sees one another through God's eyes (Lesson 1). What genuine care actually is (Lesson 2). How correction becomes restoration rather than injury (Lesson 3). All of it is heart work. All of it precedes the hands.

Now, the fourth lesson picks up a thread that has been running under the surface of the other three. Christians need each other to keep going. Not only in extraordinary moments, but in the ordinary weeks when faith feels routine and the world feels heavier than it used to. The writer of Hebrews puts the danger succinctly: hearts harden. And he prescribes a remedy just as plain. Exhort one another every day, as long as it is called "today."

That is what this lesson is about. Encouragement is not a decoration on the Christian life. It is a defense.

The Danger Hebrews Names

The writer of Hebrews is not worried about outsiders in chapter 3. He is worried about brothers.

Verse 12 begins with a warning. "Take care, brothers, lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God." The address is to Christians. The danger is real. A heart that already belongs to Christ can still drift, still harden, still fall. This is not theoretical. The whole letter to the Hebrews is written because some members of the congregation are in exactly this trouble, and the writer is calling them back.

Two details should slow us down.

The deceitfulness of sin. Hardening rarely announces itself. Sin does not walk up to a Christian and say, "I have come to cool your love for Christ today." It says something else. It says the meeting can be missed this once. The prayer will keep until tomorrow. The brother who offended you need not be forgiven yet. Each small surrender is presented as minor, because it is. It is the sum of the small surrenders, over time,

that hardens the heart. The writer of Hebrews names the mechanism: deceit. The sinner is persuaded by degrees.

The timeline is short. "Today" is the word Hebrews uses, twice in the same chapter (Heb 3:7, 13).

Tomorrow is not promised to the Christian any more than to anyone else. If the encouragement comes late, it may arrive at a heart already cooled. The urgency of the command is built into the verb tense.

This is where the lesson starts, because it explains why the New Testament never treats encouragement as optional. Hebrews frames it as armor against apostasy. Nothing less.

What Encouragement Actually Is

The Greek word behind "exhort" in Hebrews 3:13 is *parakaleō*, and the noun form is *paraklēsis*. The word is built from two pieces. *Para*, meaning "alongside." *Kaleō*, meaning "to call." To *parakaleō* a brother is to call him to your side, or to come to his side when he needs it. The image is not of someone shouting instructions from a safe distance. The image is of one Christian standing next to another and lending strength for the next step.

That is what this word means across the New Testament. Paul uses it for the comfort God gives the afflicted (2 Corinthians 1:3-7). Luke uses it for the encouragement Barnabas gave new believers in Antioch (Acts 11:23). The writer of Hebrews uses it for the work Christians are to do for one another daily. Same word. Same ministry. Coming alongside.

Jesus himself uses a related form. In John 14:16 he promises the disciples "another *Paraklētos*," the Holy Spirit, who will be with them forever. The implication is quiet but clear. The Spirit is *another* Paraklete because Jesus was the first. John picks up the term again in his first letter, where he calls Jesus our *paraklētos* before the Father (1 John 2:1). The Son stands alongside us before God. The Spirit stands alongside us in our hearts. When one Christian encourages another, he steps into a ministry the Father, Son, and Spirit are already doing.

That theological anchor matters. Encouragement is not a warm gesture a Christian happens to offer when he has the energy. Encouragement is divine work extended through the body of Christ into the life of a fellow Christian who needs it.

A few things follow, and a few things are excluded.

It is not flattery. Flattery tells a brother what he wants to hear. Encouragement tells a brother what is true about God, about his standing in Christ, and about the race he is running. Flattery leaves the brother softer toward himself. Encouragement leaves him firmer toward Christ.

It is not only verbal. Scripture encourages through words. But encouragement can also be a visit when a visit is not required, a meal when no one asked for one, a seat beside someone during the sermon on the week they almost stayed home. Presence is a form of *paraklēsis*. Barnabas encouraged the Antioch church by being there and staying there (Acts 11:23).

It is always aimed at endurance. The writer of Hebrews ties encouragement directly to holding firm to the end (Heb 3:14). The goal is not the good feeling of the moment. The goal is the brother still walking with Christ a decade from now.

Every Day, as Long as It Is Called "Today"

Hebrews presses the frequency of the command.

"Exhort one another every day, as long as it is called 'today.'" The phrase is deliberately strange. "As long as it is called today" is almost a tautology. The writer uses the awkwardness to make a point. Today is the only day the Christian has for sure. Sunday morning is not enough. A quarterly small group is not enough. If hardening moves by the week and by the day, encouragement has to move with it.

A congregation that reserves encouragement for the public assembly has built its defenses for the wrong timeline. The hardening happens Tuesday. The weariness sets in Thursday. The temptation to stop coming presents itself Saturday night. The encouragement that never reaches the days between Sundays arrives late. Hebrews knows this and gives the remedy accordingly. Every day.

This is why the early church ate in one another's homes (Acts 2:46), wrote letters between cities, prayed for one another by name, and treated hospitality as a shared obligation (Rom 12:13; 1 Pet 4:9). The daily work was what kept the weekly assembly meaningful. Remove the daily rhythm and the weekly rhythm starts to feel like theater.

None of this requires a program. It requires attention. One text on a Wednesday. One phone call when a brother came to mind during the day. One visit to a widow in the middle of the week. Daily is small, repeated, and cumulative. So is hardening. The two are racing each other, and the writer of Hebrews is telling the church which one must win.

The Whole Body's Work

Hebrews does not tell the elders to exhort, or the preacher to exhort. It tells the church to exhort one another. The scope is total. Every member is enlisted.

That matters, because congregations instinctively outsource ministries they find demanding. The elders will visit the sick. The preacher will call the drifter. The class teacher will follow up with the absentee. Those roles do exist, and they are honorable. But the New Testament never uses them to excuse the rest of the body from the ministry of coming alongside. The "one another" commands do not have a staff clause.

Luke gives the church a patron saint for this work. Joseph of Cyprus, a Levite, sold a field and laid the money at the apostles' feet in the earliest days of the Jerusalem church. The apostles gave him a new name that stuck. Barnabas. *Son of Encouragement* (Acts 4:36). The name was a compliment he had already earned by the way he carried himself.

Barnabas shows up three more times in Acts, each time doing the same work.

When Saul of Tarsus arrived in Jerusalem after his conversion and the disciples were afraid of him, Barnabas took him, brought him to the apostles, and vouched for him (Acts 9:27). Without that single act of coming alongside, the early church very nearly closed the door on the apostle to the Gentiles.

When word reached Jerusalem that a Greek-speaking church had sprung up in Antioch, the apostles sent Barnabas to investigate. He arrived, saw the grace of God, and rejoiced. Then he "exhorted them all to remain faithful to the Lord with steadfast purpose" (Acts 11:23). The word behind "exhorted" is the same *parakaleō*. Barnabas did in Antioch exactly what Hebrews tells the whole church to do every day.

When that new congregation needed a teacher, Barnabas walked to Tarsus, found Saul, who had by then faded from public ministry, and brought him to Antioch. The two of them taught there together for a year (Acts 11:25-26). Saul did not recover his ministry alone. Barnabas came alongside and handed it back to him.

The point is not that every Christian has to become a Barnabas in title. The point is that every Christian is already called to do the work. Luke gives one man the name *Son of Encouragement* because he did the work consistently. The rest of the congregation did it too, or the early church would have collapsed before Acts 2 was finished.

Who Needs It

The answer is all of us.

Paul spells it out to the Thessalonians. "And we urge you, brothers, admonish the idle, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, be patient with them all" (1 Thessalonians 5:14). Four different conditions. Four different responses. But the attitude underneath is the same. The congregation is responsible for each of them. No one in the church is to be beyond the body's reach.

The idle need admonishment, because care is not indulgence. The fainthearted need encouragement, because weariness is not unbelief. The weak need help, because the strong are not meant to leave them behind. All of them need patience, because no one is restored on a schedule.

If there is a temptation in Paul's list, it is the temptation to assume the lesson is about the others. The idle are those people. The fainthearted are those people. Paul gives no such allowance. All four types are in the same congregation, and the "be patient with them all" at the end is a summary command to every member about every member, including the one in the mirror.

Even Paul needed encouragement. He tells the Roman church that he longs to see them so that "we may be mutually encouraged by each other's faith, both yours and mine" (Romans 1:12). He tells the Corinthians that God, who "comforts the downcast," had comforted him by the arrival of Titus (2 Corinthians 7:6). Paul was not above needing a brother to come alongside. He names it openly. If the apostle to the Gentiles needed encouragement from Titus, no Christian today is too mature to receive what a brother has to offer.

The answer to the guiding question of this lesson is that the body is the one who comes alongside. When we falter, the body comes. When the body falters, we come. No Christian stands alone, because Christ has not placed any Christian alone.

What a Silent Congregation Forfeits

Imagine a congregation where the ministry of encouragement has gone dormant. The Sunday assembly continues. The classes meet. The sermons get preached. On the surface, nothing looks wrong.

But under the surface, the work Hebrews describes has stopped.

No one tells the young mother that her faith is visible to the next generation watching her. No one tells the older brother whose prayers at the Lord's table lift the room that his prayers are lifting the room. No one calls the widow on the Tuesday of her hard week. No one stops the drifting teenager in the hallway to ask how he is doing, and means it. No one writes the note. No one takes the meal. No one sits beside the grieving friend and says nothing at all.

In a year of that, the writer of Hebrews would recognize the symptoms. Hearts harden in silence. Faithful members begin to wonder whether anyone would notice their absence. Newer Christians begin to suspect the body is not quite what they were told it would be. The drifter drifts further, because nothing is drawing him back. What a congregation forfeits when encouragement goes silent is not a feeling. It is people.

The warning of Hebrews is not paranoia. It is the observation of a pastor who has seen the pattern before. A church without daily mutual exhortation is a church whose members are exposed to the slow, normal hardening that comes to any Christian who tries to endure alone.

Looking to Jesus

The ministry the church is called to is a ministry the Lord is already performing.

Consider how Jesus speaks about the Spirit in the upper room. He is about to leave the disciples, and he promises them *another* Paraklete, "another Helper, to be with you forever," the Spirit of truth (John 14:16-17). The word *another* carries the whole message. The Spirit will do for them what Jesus has been doing. Jesus was the first Paraklete. He had walked alongside them for three years, calling them to his side, correcting their mistakes, answering their questions, and bearing their weight. When he had to go, he would send the Spirit to continue that ministry from within them rather than beside them. The ministry itself was never in doubt.

Consider how Jesus invited the weary during his public work. "Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls" (Matthew 11:28-29). This is not the voice of a distant teacher. It is the voice of a *Paraklete*. Come to me. Take my yoke. Learn from me. The invitation is to come alongside him, and find that he has been alongside the weary all along.

Consider how Jesus handled Peter on the night of the betrayal. Before Peter ever denied him, Jesus had already seen it and already prayed. "Simon, Simon, behold, Satan demanded to have you, that he might

sift you like wheat, but I have prayed for you that your faith may not fail. And when you have turned again, strengthen your brothers" (Luke 22:31-32). Read that sentence slowly. Jesus interceded for Peter before Peter knew he needed it. The encouragement began in the throne room, before Peter ever spoke a word in the courtyard. Then, at the end of the sentence, Jesus assigns Peter the same work. *Strengthen your brothers*. The one who has been held will hold others. The one who has been prayed for will pray for others. The ministry Jesus did for Peter, Peter is now to extend to the rest of the church. This is how *paraklēsis* travels.

And the ministry continues. Hebrews says that Jesus "always lives to make intercession" for those who draw near to God through him (Hebrews 7:25). Right now, as this lesson is read, the Lord is standing alongside his people before the throne. The brother who encourages another brother this week steps into a ministry his Lord is already performing at the right hand of God.

This is the pattern. Christ stands alongside us. The Spirit stands alongside us. We stand alongside one another. The same word covers all three motions. The same love runs through all three.

A Final Encouraging Word

A Christian who has ever been reached by a timely word from a brother knows what this lesson is about. It is one of the most ordinary things in the life of the church, and one of the most important. The phone call that came on the hard week. The note that said the right thing. The friend who sat down next to you in the pew when he could have sat anywhere. Small in itself. Large in effect.

That ministry is never wasted. Every time a member of the body comes alongside another member, the deceitfulness of sin finds its grip a little harder to maintain. Every time a word of truth is spoken into a tired faith, the race to the end gets a little easier. This is the work Hebrews is calling the whole church to, and it is the work the whole church is competent to do, because every member has a Paraklete of his own and can extend to his brother what has already been extended to him.

Look around. Your congregation already has members who do this work quietly and faithfully. The calling is not to start something new. The calling is to strengthen what is already alive, and to refuse the drift toward silence that every congregation has to resist. When the body of Christ practices *paraklēsis* with one another, no one drifts silently, no one hardens alone, and the Lord who stands beside each of us is honored in the way we stand beside one another.

The first movement of the quarter closes here. The heart has been set. Next week the hands take up the work.

Discussion Questions

1. The writer of Hebrews frames encouragement as a defense against "the deceitfulness of sin." What does that frame add to the way Christians usually think about encouragement? How is the deceit of sin different from an outright, obvious temptation?

2. The Greek word *paraklēsis* means "to call alongside." How is that image different from what most Christians picture when they hear the English word *encouragement*? What does it exclude, and what does it include that the English word might miss?

3. Hebrews tells the church to exhort one another *every day, as long as it is called today*. Why does the writer press the frequency so hard? What changes when a congregation treats encouragement as a daily rhythm instead of a Sunday-morning event?

4. Barnabas earned the name *Son of Encouragement* by vouching for Saul when no one else would, strengthening the Antioch church, and going back for Saul when Saul had faded from public view. Who in your own life has played a Barnabas role for you? What is one specific way you could play that role for someone else this month?

5. Paul admits in 2 Corinthians 7:6 that even he needed encouragement from Titus when he was downcast. Why is it sometimes harder to *receive* encouragement than to give it? What does a Christian forfeit when he refuses what a brother is trying to offer?

6. Imagine your congregation a year from now, after every member has taken the ministry of *paraklēsis* seriously for twelve months. What is one specific thing that would be different? What is one daily or weekly practice you could begin this week to help move the congregation toward that picture?