

HOW TO STAY ENCOURAGED IN LEADERSHIP

BY MATT HOGG

Have you ever been on the receiving end of some encouragement? I know it can feel in short supply in leadership, but if you've experienced some encouraging words from a congregation member, a team member, or mentor, you will know that it can have a hugely transformative effect.

Imagine a balloon being inflated. That's how I often envisage encouragement in leadership, not in a prideful sense of being puffed up, but in the sense of being filled with fresh strength and courage for the journey ahead. For a balloon, air is put in. For a leader, the fresh wind of God's Spirit or the thoughtful words of God's people fills one's very being. In fact, to encourage literally means to 'put courage in'. I think a leader could thrive on encouragement alone. Against all the odds, year after year, through thick and thin.



The opposite can be true of the balloon when the air is let out and it deflates to a soggy pile of plastic. On the receiving end of some discouragement, the leader can easily be reduced to a soggy mess too. Having the courage 'knocked out' of you is not a fun experience. There have been times when I haven't wanted to open my email inbox for fear of the discouragement I may find. But time and time again, when discouragement lurks, I have found that the Lord is near, ready to release fresh strength and courage for the journey.

Maybe this is a time when you need fresh courage, especially after all we've been through in recent years.

FRESH ENCOURAGEMENT IN THE BIBLE

Look at the way David 'strengthened himself in the Lord' in 1 Samuel 30:6. It was not a good day 'in the parish' for David. We're told that he was greatly distressed because there were threats of being stoned. David found strength in the Lord that day. It was precisely what he needed. The Spirit of God breathed fresh strength and courage into him for that moment.

What about Peter and John in Acts 4? Another tricky day at the office. In no uncertain terms they had been told not to speak any longer in the name of Jesus (Acts 4:17). What was their response? They sought the Lord, along with all the other believers (verses 23-31). What do they pray but for boldness and courage to speak the word (verse 29). What does God do? He answers them immediately and we see the outcome (verse 31), an emboldened, encouraged, courageous early church speaking the word of God.

The gifts of the Spirit, Paul tells us are for the common good (1 Corinthians 12). The picture we have is of a church being built up, but notice that the Spirit of God is linked to this ministry. Breathing fresh life and courage for the

journey that God calls us to. Paul saw the importance of encouragement in the process of being built up in Christ and in the faith.

KEEPING ENCOURAGED

For years I have kept a folder named 'encouragement'. I just opened it to have a look in there and have messages and notes going back to 2011. I found keeping a record of the stories, testimonies, feedback, and words of encouragement over the years to be so life giving and courage inducing.

I have lots of ways of putting myself in the way of encouragement (for example, reading the Bible, spiritual disciplines, prayer with others, reading biographies and hearing how God has been at work through men and women of faith over the centuries) but the encouragement folder is definitely another tool that I refer to now and again. It has served to:

- Release faith.
- Bring fresh perspective.
- Remind me of my calling.
- Deepen my love for people.
- Raise my expectation for God to move.
- Remind me of the need for others.
- Show me how God had been at work.
- Cause me to worship and say 'thank you God, you are amazing!'
- Cause me to appreciate what has already happened rather than thinking about what hasn't.

Whether you're a church leader, leading a Venture or Falcon holiday, a youth leader, leading a small group or whatever kind of leadership you are in, try and put yourself in the way of encouragement and you will find that God begins to put in fresh strength and courage for the journey in front of you.

Practical Ideas to Keep Encouraged

In addition to spiritual disciplines and encouragement folders, what about these for a few other practical ideas:

1. PRAY FOR ENCOURAGEMENT

I have prayed for years on and off for God to encourage me. I look back at the men and women of faith in the Bible and over Church history, and these were courageous people. I would love to have a fraction of their courage for the Lord, and the best place to go for that is to ask God for fresh courage. Ask him to encourage you. Ask him to open your eyes and ears to the places and people he wants to encourage you through today. I bet you will find him in some surprising places.

2. UNCOVER ENCOURAGEMENT

In London, the turnover of people often meant that we would have someone with us on average for about two years, so before they moved away from the capital I would ask them to share what God had been doing in their life. Had I not asked, I may not have found out. It wasn't that they were hiding it from me, it was often that they didn't know it was important to share it. By asking them to share, we were able to uncover some encouragement which, with their permission, I was able to subsequently use in training of leaders and in preaching.

3. COMMIT TO BEING ENCOURAGED

There is always the need for encouragement. Perhaps I'm at risk of sounding a bit needy, or like I get easily discouraged. It's worth saying that my natural bent is optimistic in outlook, but even so, I need God's encouragement and strength. God is ready to give you enough encouragement for today. Tomorrow you can ask for more. In the Lord's prayer we pray, 'give us this day our daily bread', it conveys a daily dependence on the Lord. Maybe included under that heading is a



prayer along the lines of 'Lord, I'm going to need some encouragement today, I can't wait to see how you're going to bring it'.

4. SPEND TIME WITH ENCOURAGERS

I have been so blessed to have such encouraging people around me, whether that's other leaders, peers, friends or family. Honestly, I don't know where I would be without all that encouragement. The encouragers are those who can see something of God at work in you, and are part of the community of faith calling it out of you. It's the ministry we each bring for the common good. There will be people around you who are looking to build you up today. There will be people around you who you can build up too.

5. ENCOURAGE SOMEONE ELSE

God gives encouragement as a gift, and a gift is to be shared with others. Don't hold back, encourage someone today. Not glib or trite soundbites, but something specific, 'I like the way you...', or, 'I was reading this verse today and I wanted to share it with you because it encouraged me...', or, 'When you did 'x' it showed that you really understood the kind of culture and values that are important to us as a community...'.

I've no doubt that you will have ways of keeping encouraged and finding ways to stay encouraged in the Lord. Why not share your thoughts and comments? In the meantime, have a look at the questions below if you want engage with this topic a bit more.



QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

- Where are you on the spectrum at the moment? More towards the encouraged end, or more towards the discouraged end? Note down why that might be the case and take it to the Lord in prayer. Regardless of where you are on the spectrum, why not ask God to strengthen and encourage you today?
- Of the five practical suggestions above, which one particularly stands out to you today? Is there something that you need to do in response?
- Has there been a mentor or leader who has encouraged you over the years? Why not write them a note to say thanks and offer them a couple of specific things that they have done to be a blessing to you? I guarantee that it will be of enormous encouragement to them.

