

THE ENCOURAGEMENT OF THE SCRIPTURES

When we were in Ireland, my cousin Tim treated us to guided tours of his favorite sites. He always drove—I wasn't thrilled about navigating the wrong side of narrow Irish roads. Major routes are barely two lanes wide with no shoulders. Some roads are little more than driveways.

On one of our trips, Tim stopped as close as he could to the side of the road and pointed to a small tree on the crest of a hill next to us. He said: "That's my favorite tree." It was bent almost completely over so that the main trunk grew horizontally, parallel with the ground. Storms off the North Atlantic can produce strong winds over eighty miles per hour—even higher in the mountains. This tree had been shaped by those strong winds. For Tim, it symbolized perseverance—gnarled and bent, but still green and growing.

You see, a church-planting ministry in Ireland is tough. The Irish are suspicious of and resistant to evangelicals. They call them cults with more contempt than we pour into that word. Tim has been there ten years and seen very little lasting fruit among the Irish. Sometimes he feels like that tree, forever shaped by the challenges of his ministry yet determined to be faithful and fruitful, optimistic and cheerful.

Do you ever wonder where people like Tim go for encouragement?

Where do you go? When hurricane force winds blow through your life, where do you look for resources to maintain faithfulness? Prayer? Family? Your church family? Close friends? Solomon spoke of "...a friend who sticks closer than a brother" (Proverbs 18:24). Do you have someone like that? They are God-sends!

What about the Scriptures? What role does the Bible play when you're bent over by an eighty mile an hour adversity.

Frankly, some circumstances are so disabling that in the teeth of them we can't even pick up our Bibles. And if we do, we feel too numb for the words to land meaningfully. We have to absorb the initial grief and shock and then grope our way back to normalcy. It's usually on the trip back that we regain the capacity to hear God's voice.

But even then, we may not want to listen. Sometimes we have hardened our souls against an insensitive individual who used Bible verses to keep our pain at a distance. They turn the powerful words of God into galling platitudes.

And sometimes we harden our souls in a refusal to listen. Anger smoulders underneath our pain—we're angry at God for allowing such a thing to happen. Or we don't really believe that God can or will make a difference. We want God to listen to our laments more than we want to listen to our Father's voice. We want changed circumstances so we won't hurt, not internal resources for endurance and hope.

The enemy of our souls delights to keep us in despair, hopeless. He may deflect our desires for God's word with the simplest of diversions.

And to be honest, even if we crack open our Bibles, we may not have a clue about where to turn. If we have not been reading the Bible and treasuring it up in our hearts, becoming accustomed to hearing God's voice in it when times are ordinary, we will be absolutely bewildered when times are tough. As one retired missionary said: "You can't get ready for a crisis in your life—you have to be ready."

Listen: "...everything that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that through

endurance and *the encouragement of the Scriptures* we might have hope” (Romans 15:4).

This verse is an aside from the Apostle Paul. Beginning in chapter 14, Paul has been talking about conflicts that arise between “weak” and “strong” Christians. Weak Christians, Paul says, are burdened with religious rules that limit their diets, dictate their calendars, and govern their walk with God. Strong Christians have a more mature understanding of their freedom in Christ from such rules.

Weak Christians feel spiritually safe within the constraints of their man-made religious obligations. Strong Christians celebrate God’s goodness in ways that appear scandalous to the weak. So rule-bound Christians get offended by the freedom of the strong. And strong Christians show contempt for the grim determinations of the weak.

Paul counseled each group to put up with the other. Then he added: “Each of us should please his neighbor for his good, to build him up. For even Christ did not please himself but, *as it is written*: ‘The insults of those who insult you have fallen on me’” (Romans 15:2-3).

Paul is quoting Psalm 69:9, one of the “Messianic” Psalms—Psalms in which the early church, led by God’s Spirit, saw references to Jesus, the Christ.

And it’s here that he gives us the aside about the encouragement of the Scriptures: “...everything that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that through endurance and *the encouragement of the Scriptures* we might have hope.”

Puzzle over that for a few moments? What is it about Scripture that encourages us and kindles hope. Think about yourself facing that eighty mile an hour trial. What keeps you from turning to the Scriptures when storms erupt in your life? How will God’s word give you resources sufficient to stay rooted, to bend without breaking?

Psalm 119 was written by a young man of royalty. He was not the king, but had access to the king’s court. The ruling monarch seems to have been one of Israel’s apostate kings who abandoned faith in Yahweh and pursued other gods. Because of this, the author lived under tremendous pressure: slandered by those in authority, mocked openly, smeared with lies, persecuted for his allegiance to Yahweh.

The impact on him was devastating. He confesses to being “weary with sorrow.” He felt like “a wineskin in the smoke.” Yet what stands out in Psalm 119 is not the oppressive dreariness of his circumstances, but his love for God’s word. Listen to a sampling of what he says:

- “Let me understand the teaching of your precepts. Then I will meditate on your wonders. My soul is weary with sorrow; strengthen me according to your word. Keep me from deceitful ways; be gracious to me through your law. I have chosen the way of truth; I have set my heart on your laws. I hold fast to your statutes, O LORD; do not let me be put to shame. I run in the path of your commands, for you have set my heart free” (Psa. 119:27-32).
- “Remember your word to your servant, for you have given me hope. My comfort in my suffering is this: Your promise preserves my life” (Psa. 119:49-50).
- “May your unfailing love be my comfort, according to your promise to your servant” (Psa. 119:76).
- “If your law had not been my delight, I would have perished in my affliction” (Psa. 119:92).
- “How sweet are your words to my taste, sweeter than honey to my mouth! ... Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light for my path” (Psa. 119:103; 105).
- “Trouble and distress have come upon me, but your commands are my delight” (Psa. 119:143).
- “Great peace have they who love your law, and nothing can make them stumble” (Psa. 119:165).

What's especially remarkable about the poet's lyric joy is that it is rooted in his study of the Torah, specifically, the five books of Moses. Is that where you go for encouragement? The legal code in the Torah governed Israel's worship: her rituals and sacrifice, her priests, what they wore and what they did. The Law of Moses talks about moral purity, property rights, civic responsibilities as citizens and neighbors. Doesn't that warm the cockles of your heart?

This last week I finished reading the books of Exodus and Leviticus in my personal devotions. Someone asked me if I read *all* the verses in Leviticus. It can be a tedious read, kind of like the genealogies we typically skip over.

I did read all the verses, and found them fascinating. The ordination of Aaron and his sons was captivating. Even the arcane details of sacrificial rituals held glimpses of what Jesus accomplished on the cross. What jumped out at me over and over again was the holiness of God and his desires that his people be holy themselves; his demands that his people treat their God as holy.

The young man who composed Psalm 119 found the Torah to be a breath of fresh air in the oppressive apostasy and intrigues of the royal courts. Observing God's ways set him free to live as God intended his people to live. They were words of promise, faithfulness and love that stood the test of time.

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Hope is a casualty of acute distress. Life's traumas are where dreams die and courage fades. Prolonged pain feeds our fears that nothing will ever be the same again. So how does the encouragement of the Scriptures generate hope?

Mostly by reorienting our sense of what's real and what matters. In acute pain we can see no farther than the bounded horizons of our suffering. It fogs our thinking and fixes our attention.

Scripture injects the possibilities of God into our hopelessness. It speaks of a God who is good, whose love endures forever, whose faithfulness spans generations. It tells us that God doesn't waste pain, but uses it to shape Jesus in us.

Scriptures tell stories of others who emerged from crushing sorrow with faith intact, and life renewed. The Psalms, for instance, resonate with passion. Laments read like rants against suffering and even question God's apparent absence and forgetfulness, yet they go on to speak confidently of hope and anticipation.

During one of the darkest periods of my life, I lived every day for about a year in Psalm 25. I continued to preach and teach, but Psalm 25 was where this preacher went for comfort and encouragement. It became a familiar retreat whose words of confident trust, and lament and anguished cries for help gave expression for my soul. Psalm 25 was an anchor of hope in a time when hope had all but vanished. It was all I could read, but it was enough. Through the encouragement of Scriptures, hope gradually returned.

I don't know how God might use the Scriptures to speak into your pain. I doubt very much that a blind stab in the dark will accomplish much—opening your Bible at random and pointing at a verse. God's words are powerful, not magical.

The more familiar we are with the biblical message, the more open we will be to its encouragements in difficult times. As we said earlier, you can't get ready for a crisis in your life—you have to be ready. Being a faithful, attentive, thoughtful reader of the Bible will equip you to hear its consolation above the voices of hopelessness that nag us when challenging times come. Knowing the Bible will give you cues about where to turn for encouragement.

And, turning to the Scriptures in the midst of pain can be a courageous discipline of faith, a defiance of circumstances, a refusal to yield to despair. Even if the words don't land immediately, opening ourselves to God's voice may well be our first, stumbling baby steps back to spiritual sanity.

Refusing the Scriptures shuts us up to our own resources. It is an act of unbelief, understandable in the immediate numbness of sorrow, but ultimately defeating. In shutting out the Scriptures we close ourselves to that primary source God uses to encourage and restore hope.

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The Bible is so much more than a textbook for Sunday School, or an answer-book for theological questions. It is the word of God, living and powerful. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit—it cuts clean through to the essence of things and exposes everything that is in our hearts. In the Bible we find our place in God's story, and in God's story—a story that stretches into eternity—everything turns out right. God wins!

Trust this book—and its Author. Turn to it when you least feel like doing so. Accustom yourself to its rhythms and its message. Ask God's Spirit to open it to your mind, and to open your heart to its message. And as you do, may you discover the encouragement of the Scriptures Paul describes, a restoration of hope.