

The Need for Encouragement

Colossians 3:21

Painter Benjamin West's first venture into the arts could have ended in disaster. He was taking care of his younger sister Sally while his mother went shopping. The discovery of several bottles of ink inspired him to paint his sister's portrait.

Spilled ink and stray brush marks prevailed. Benjamin's intended work of art was a mess, and so was he. But when his mother returned, she looked past the ink blotches and stained furniture, picked up the piece of paper, and said, "Why, it's Sally!" She leaned over and kissed her young son.

Throughout his life, Benjamin West told of his special memory and turning point: "My mother's kiss made me a painter."

Simplistic? No, it was the essences of *encouragement*. *Encouragement* is the feeling that comes when someone says, "I like the way you do that. Mind if I watch?" **Encouragement is the confidence that I am loved for who I am and not just for what I can do.** *Encouragement* is the knowledge that, no matter what happens, I am *accepted and needed as an indispensable part of my family.* *Encouragement* is the assurance from someone I love that *it's all right if I make a mistake* because that's the way I learn. **Encouragement is the conviction that I as a person am more important than the problems I get involved in.** *Encouragement* is the acceptance of an *honest appraisal that leaves me challenged to grow rather than condemned to fail.*

Children look to parents for love, acceptance, warmth, and understanding. Those who have ever felt *left out, misunderstood, or unaccepted* know the need for encouragement. *Encouragement* cultivates enriching values and goals in life. **It builds healthy self-**

esteem, self-confidence, and good behavior. Discouragement, on the other hand, breeds *disappointment, dissatisfaction, dejection, and frustration.* A leading child psychiatrist, Rudolf Dreikurs, insists that, "a misbehaving child is a discouraged child." He strongly asserts "...encouragement is more important than any other aspect of child rearing."

As we begin this year's series on the Family, it is my deep desire that I will be able to do more than just give you some facts and figures concerning marriage, family, and home life. I want to give to a *new hope and direction* for your life.

It is true that the home is under the attack of the enemy, but I want to remind you that *broken homes and toxic families are not unique to modern society.* In fact one of the greatest men in the entire Bible came from a home that was full of conflict and severely lacking in discipline. His name was *Joseph*, and his story illustrates many of the things that can and do go wrong in families today. His beginning was in the land of Canaan, where his father, Jacob, and his mother, Rachel, lived. As beginnings go, it was a fine one. His mother gave birth to him later in life, after she and his father had prayed many years for him. So many, in fact, that his father's other wives (his aunt Leah, Bilhah, and Zilpah) had already had several children!

Joseph loved his mother and she loved him. His brothers always said he was his father's favorite, and they were probably right. But when he was just a boy Rachel died, and their home life after that was unusual even by Bedouin standards. Twelve boys with four different mothers and a father who loved them, but did not lead them. It was an environment ripe for conflict, and they had their share. The competition that naturally exists between siblings was intensified in their home as he and his brothers vied for their father's attention, time, affection and inheritance.

Joseph left home earlier than he had planned. (Actually, he had never planned to leave home at all, but more about that later.) Suffice it to say he was forced out of the nest a bit prematurely, and he landed in a culture totally foreign and unfamiliar to him. **He started over many times in his life.** This was to be just the first of many changes. Wherever he found himself, he tried to make the best of his circumstances. **Regardless of the way things looked, he always believed that God (the God of his father, his father's father, and his father as well) had a purpose for his life.** This he never forgot. Even though it happened thousands of years ago, the elements of his story resurface each day in homes across modern America. x

But Joseph had two crucial things going for him. **First, he was loved.** As the long-awaited child of two people who married for love, Joseph was welcomed into his family with excitement and gratitude. I believe his parents, especially his mother, let him know early on how much he was loved. Although she died when he was still a child, she was certainly able in those first few years to be an encourager to her precious son.

It is impossible to overestimate the value of a parent's love in a child's life. There is no adequate replacement for the parental attention children crave; not even lavish gifts or possessions showered on an otherwise forgotten child can compensate for a lack of parental love. Studies have shown its absence to affect nearly every facet of a child's nurture, from academic performance to sexual identity. Children need nurturing, and without it they struggle.

Second, Joseph lived with a constant awareness of the presence of God in his life. When he was a young boy, God gave him *dreams* that set his life on course and filled him with *hope* and *purpose*. He had dreams you wouldn't believe (or maybe you would), but they caused him no end of trouble from the very start. When he shared them with his brothers they were overcome with jealousy and came to hate him.

But Joseph never forgot the visions, even in his darkest days. They *sustained* him, *encouraged* him, and ultimately *delivered* him many times and in many places. When all around him seemed chaotic, he remembered those dreams. They gave him purpose and significance and reassured him that God did have a plan for his life.

As a child, the dreams (and his immature handling of them) had a negative impact, but as Joseph grew into adulthood he found strength in them. They became his "terrible good" - a fearful thing deep within him that was in fact a tremendous gift for great good.

Joseph faced incredible obstacles to growth and success and yet became a key figure in the eventual establishment of the nation of Israel. He had every reason to fail but he didn't. He was kidnapped and left for dead, sold as a slave, exalted, imprisoned, used, forgotten, and feared. **He saw many changes through the years, and also discovered one constant: nothing in life is more real than the presence of God.** God was the one thing in his life that never varied. Many people might have given up in circumstances similar to his, but they would have missed the thrill of the unfolding of God's plan.

He had crippling strikes against him, but prospered in the long run because he knew what it felt like to be loved. In every trying circumstance he clung to the belief that God had a special purpose for his life.

Psychologists have debated for years whether heredity or environment plays the stronger role in shaping the human personality. The "nature vs. nurture" argument has continued in one way or another for decades. Some would contend that we are chiefly products of our heredity, that our parents and our biological background have the greatest influence over who we become. Others hold that the environment we live in plays the primary role in *determining our personality* and our.

In Joseph's case the environmental cards seemed stacked against him: He was the product of a broken, divided home, motherless at a young sensitive age and saddled with a caring but ineffective father who indulged him continually, and hated by his step-brothers. Yet this young man grew to become perhaps the *godliest man in the Old Testament* - a man of *strength, wisdom, and character* unlike any other, with the possible exception of the prophet Daniel.

Perhaps in Joseph we find the real truth about the *heredity or environment* issue: It's not nature or nurture that determines our destiny - it's neither. No matter what drama we have been cast in as a character, it is possible to "re-script" what has been written for us by heredity or environment and live a story that is uniquely our own.

Each of us are very aware that our family's faith does not automatically become our own faith. On the other hand, the *weaknesses* of our families do not automatically become ours either. Without question *we are responsible for the choices we make as thinking adults*, and we, not our parents, will be held accountable for them.

We are living in a time when many adults attempt to blame their shortcomings or failures on events that took place in childhood, as though their experiences were unique. No one escapes childhood without scars. *Our parents did not, we did not, and our children will not.* We all have scars! The man or woman who ultimately becomes the person God intended is *not* someone *without scars* but one who has allowed Jesus Christ to "break the power of *concealed sin*" and to *heal* and *use* these unique marks of experience.

It is true that all of us have some measure of wounds in our life. Those *wounds* may range from *sexual abuse, distorted and damaged family relationships*, or a *deeply wounded self-image*. But in spite of the *untold stories* and the *unresolved conflict*, we still have to

choose if we are going to allow the *wounds of life* to make us *bitter* or *better*. We can chose to allow our past to steal our joy, and our dreams, or we can allow the Lord Jesus Christ to heal our deepest scars and replace our weaknesses with His strength. With Him as our Savior we can change the script, we can overcome insurmountable obstacles, and to live productive, victorious lives.

In his book *Children at Risk*, Dr. James Dobson compares the life of a teenager to a walk down a long corridor. Doors marked "alcohol," "sex," "drugs," "materialism," and so forth line the hallway. From behind every door come the sounds of laughter, fun, music, and beckoning friends. The young person walks down this corridor alone, occasionally hearing his name being called from within. What is there to keep him from opening any door and entering? If parents are not present or have abdicated their authority in a young person's life, there is very little to stop him. Once a door is opened, Dr. Dobson warns, the "monster" lurking within seizes the teenager and too often holds him in a choking grip for the rest of his life. There is great danger in cracking open doors that should remain shut, and in walking the corridor alone!

The corridor, or journey, from childhood to adulthood is lined with doors to opportunities that can easily derail us. Not only are there doors marked "alcohol," "sex," and "drugs" that mask events and experiences that can harm us. But there are equally dangerous doors we don't choose, but that seem to open and try to pull us in -doors marked "divorce," "abandonment," "abuse," "conflict," and "loss."

The hallway of Joseph's life was lined with many doors he did not choose. An *ineffective father*, the *early death of his mother*, and a *blended family* that would be considered unusual even by today's loose standards, certainly all these *had a profound impact on this young man.* His *life experience* landed him *in a pit, in prison, and in exile from his family and his homeland.* Few would blame Joseph if he had failed to amount to anything at all.

Instead Joseph navigated the treacherous waters from youth to adulthood with great success. His experience of the *true* and *living* God gave him reason to *believe* and *proclaim* that no matter what seeming misfortune came his way, *God was able to use it for good.* When we walk with the Living God, the grasping "monsters" from life's hallway have a tough time getting a grip on our lives. **The Protector who walked with Joseph will also enable us to overcome all the temptations and barriers we encounter in that daunting corridor.** *Life's monsters* are simply *no match* for the man or woman *who has a vital relationship with the living God.*

Because of his unfailing confidence in the presence of God, Joseph's faith even impressed the pagan Pharaoh of Egypt. His faith caused Pharaoh to ask, "Can we find such a one as this, a man in whom is the Spirit of God?" Joseph was a living illustration of the apostle Paul's declaration in Romans 8:28, "And we know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose."

No man, woman, or child is destined to be a victim of heredity or environment. Instead we are to be *victors*, for "in all these things we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us." **The difference between victim and victor is a difference in mindset.** The *victim* focuses on life's injustices, believes he deserves "breaks," waits for someone else to do something for him, has difficulty trusting, and often won't try because he feels all is hopeless. The *victor's* perspective is radically different. He acknowledges that life is hard, but looks for ways to overcome. He/she doesn't believe life owes them anything, doesn't wait for others to do what they can do for themselves, they simply trust God, knowing that *success* and *failure* are both facts of life.

So regardless of where you have been, or even where you are today, God has a plan for your life. Will you allow Him to rewrite the script for your happiness?

If you are not saved, why not today?

Everyone please stand for prayer.

Father,

Your Word is true. Help me to see that my past failures or present circumstances do not have to dominate my life. Give me the courage to allow You to rewrite the script for my life for your glory. In Jesus' name. Amen.