

A lot of us get discouraged these days and I think there is a lot of discouragement today and really, a lot of people falling into anxiety about different things and even despair and we've been talking about that, you know that. Some of us get worried about our families. Some of us get very anxious about our finances and some of us are discouraged about our careers and the directions that our lives are taking and of course, we've been sharing over these past weeks that the God who created us, is utterly different from that. He is not discouraged at all, he is the very opposite of discouragement and I just point you to that verse again, if you would look at Romans 15:5, where that is stated so plainly.

Romans 15:5, "May the God of steadfastness and encouragement grant you to live in such harmony with one another," and so this dear book says that God, the Creator is a God of steadfastness and encouragement. So he is a God of encouragement and the Greek word is "paracelaesis", and it means comfort or consolation or exhortation. But loved ones it doesn't mean verbal encouragement. It doesn't mean God kind of comes alongside you and says, "Keep going, keep going, I am right with you. You're going to make it. It'll all come out in the end" it's not that, you see. That's not the meaning of it.

I think a lot of us feel that that's what this word means. God is the God of encouragement, "Oh yeah, he's kind of a cheerleader. He's cheering me on. He is saying, you're going to make it, you're going to make it, keep going", because of course, that's all we mean by encouragement. That's all we can do for each other usually. We kind of spur each other on and we give each other verbal encouragement and indeed would you not say that that's often what we get into with this church thing?

I mean we often get into a habit of coming here on Sunday to kind of "get a little encouragement" as we say. And we think, "Well, we'll get stirred up a little or encouraged a little so that we can go back in there and really knock it to them." And we kind of feel, "Well, maybe on Sunday, maybe I can get some words that will kind of give me a lift. And then I'll go back, and the stuff will just be sitting there the same as usual, but maybe I'll go back with a little more strength."

Loved ones, that isn't what this means. That's not what it means when it says, "God is the God of encouragement". It's nothing like as weak as that at all. It's not as weak as verbal encouragement. It's something far stronger than that. You remember that Jesus called the Holy Spirit, the "paraclete". Now I know you can't spell the Greek word "paracelaesis" but you can see at least "para" and parallel lines, you can see it's the same stem. "Paraclete" comes from "paracelaesis" and Jesus called the Holy Spirit the "paraclete". Now the Holy Spirit wasn't just someone who did a little ra-ra job on the apostles. He wasn't somebody who just said, "Oh keep going, keep going, you'll make it if you just keep going, just keep going, just one more hill to go and I am right with you", he didn't.

When God talks about himself being the God of encouragement, the God of paracelaesis, he means something far more real than that. I want to show it to you. By 1200 BC, the Israelites were trying

to move into the land of Canaan, there were already all kinds of people there. Malachites, you know them, Jebusites and all those "-ites" that we all read about in Sunday school, they were all there and they just swooped down on the Israelites to wipe them out, that was the situation.

In this particular event where God chose himself for the God of encouragement, there were 135,000 of the others. There were 135,000 of the other people and there were under Gideon, 32,000. Now there were 135,000 of the enemy and 32,000 of the Israelites, that was one to four. It was a one to four ratio. It was too close for God's comfort and I want you to connect this up with your own situations. One to four, that is one Israelite against four of the enemy. That was too close for God's comfort. That means it was too close for God to make his comfort real.

In other words, God saw that as something, "Well, you might be able to handle that with your own ability. You might be able to handle that with your own strength." In other words, it was too close to man being able to do it on his own. And of course, what God does in that situation is lengthen the odds, so let's look at it. Just look at, it's Judges 7:2. Now there were 135,000 of the enemy and 32,000 Israelites -- so one Israelite to four of the enemy.

Judges, 7:2, "The Lord said to Gideon, 'The people with you are too many for me to give Midianites into their hand,' -- too many? -- "lest Israel vaunt themselves against me, saying, 'My own hand has delivered me.'" I mean there were four enemies against one Israelite and yet God said, "No, no, it's too close. You might be able to do that by your own strength and your own power." I want you to keep remembering your own situations.

You know, the financial situations, the family situations that you're in, the job problems that you have, the things that you think you're never going to win on, do you see God's approach to it? He has to make the odds so long that only his encouragement will be able to do anything about it. He specializes in impossible situations. That's what he is at here.

"The Lord said to Gideon, 'The people with you are too many for me to give the Midianites into their hands, lest Israel vaunt themselves against me, saying, 'My own hand has delivered me.' Now therefore proclaim in the ears of the people, saying, 'Whoever is fearful and trembling, let him return home.'" And Gideon tested them; 22,000 returned, and 10,000 remained." The odds were lengthened considerably. He had now 10,000 people left to fight against the 135,000. It was now 1 to 12.

Would you stop being worried because it doesn't look to you as if you'll be able to get through this situation? Would you stop that? Would you begin to see that God operates that way? God doesn't come in with his comfort in some situation that you can handle yourself anyway with a little bit of luck. He comes in and he specializes in situations where the odds are so long that it's impossible.

It was now 1 to 12 and yet that was still too close for God's comfort. God knew 1 to 12, no they might still think that they won by their own strength and so he lengthens the odds even more. Verse 4, "And the Lord said to Gideon, 'The people are still too many', and you can imagine all Gideon wanted, "12 Lord, and too many?" "Take them down to the water and I will test them for you there; and he of whom I say to you, 'This man shall go with you,' shall go with you; and any of whom I say to you, 'This man shall not go with you,' shall not go.

So he brought the people down to the water; and the Lord said to Gideon, 'Every one that laps the water with his tongue, as a dog laps, you shall set by himself; likewise every one that kneels down

to drink.' And the number of those that lapped, putting their hands to their mouths, was three hundred men; but all the rest of the people knelt down to drink water. And the Lord said to Gideon, 'With the 300 men that lapped I will deliver you, and give the Midianites into your hand; and let all the others go every man to his home.'

Well, I mean it's ridiculous. 300 against 135,000, actually the ratio, I worked it out on the adding machine is 1 to 437. So it's one Israelite has to kill 437 of the others. And that's the way they go to battle. And there in chapter 7:20, "And the three companies blew the trumpets and broke the jars, holding in their left hands the torches, and in their right hands the trumpets to blow; and they cried, 'A sword for the Lord and for Gideon!' They stood every man in his place round about the camp, and all the army ran; they cried out and fled." And that's it loved ones. That's God's encouragement.

God is the God of encouragement because he acts on behalf of any man or woman that acts in the light of his nature being the God of encouragement, that's it. God is the God of encouragement because he acts on behalf of any man or woman who themselves act in the light of the fact that God's nature is the God of encouragement. In other words, Gideon acted in the absolute assurance that God's word is of encouragement and directives would be backed up by God's action. That's what it means in the Bible when it says God is the God of encouragement. It does not mean God stands back and says to Gideon, "Well, it doesn't really matter if they beat you here, I mean maybe you'll win the next time." That's not encouragement nor is it Gideon whomping himself up into a sudden pitch of power of positive thinking onto which he holds by finger tips, just and no more, so that God can do something, it isn't that.

It isn't Gideon looking at the thing with his binoculars and saying, "Yeah, yeah, I think I can make it. They look a bit weak on that side and they look, yeah and the wind's blowing the right way, yeah I think", it's not Gideon looking at the natural circumstances and thinking, "Well, it may come about anyway." See that isn't God's encouragement. God's encouragement is something deep. It is a deep assurance of a man that God is going to act to backup His own directives and promises that He has given to you. It is a deep assurance that God will act. I tried to write it down because I thought that we miserable squirmy little human beings can get out of it so easily.

We ourselves, when we talk about God's encouragement have a kind of watered down wishy-washy diluted version of it. We think that it's God kind of comforting us or it's us kind of looking at the industry averages and saying, "Well, it may come about anyway and then I'll give the glory to God", it isn't that. God's encouragement is something coming so deeply into Gideon that he has a time over a period of days to look very seriously at the mathematical facts of the size of his own army and the size of the enemies. Too often we think of encouragement as a matter of laying out a quick fleece, grabbing at some encouraging or discouraging sign, then hanging on to that fingerhold of hope by your fingertips and hoping for a quick miraculous deliverance that comes quickly before you lose what you call your faith. Isn't that right?

I mean so often that's what we think of encouragement, "Okay, okay I grip onto it, I hold on to it. Do something quick Lord before I lose my faith", well that's not it. It's Gideon receiving God's promises, knowing that God will act to back them up and then looking over a period of days at the size of his army, at the size of the opposite army and being absolutely sure that God himself will come in and will deliver.

In other words loved ones, it's really found in our word "encouragement" itself. Encouragement, for

those of you who know French, comes etymologically from the same stem as "le coeur" in French - "le coeur" -- heart and encouragement means that. It means a strengthening of your heart, a strengthening of your heart convictions about God going to do something in this situation for you so that you have it springing up from inside you, it's not some power of positive thinking. It's not some little mental thought that you've got your hands on. It's not some little intellectual theory you have of what God will do in this situation. It's the strengthening of your heart so that you know this is going to happen. Indeed our English word "comfort" has etymologically the Latin word "forte" in it and "forte" is the word for strong. So the whole meaning of paraclasis and encouragement and comfort, is a strengthening of our heart so that we are absolutely convinced that of course, God is going to act in this situation.

Now, loved ones that's what enables the God of encouragement to act in your life. It isn't you looking at Wall Street and totting up the industry averages and the likelihood of your pulling the thing off any way, it isn't. It isn't you, looking at your abilities and examination and thinking, "Well, maybe with a little help from my friends, I'll manage it", it isn't that kind of teeter-totter fiddler on the roof, "Hope everything will turn out for the best." That isn't it. The God of encouragement is you having an absolutely sure and deep conviction "This is the God that enabled Gideon to do it when one of them was fighting 437. Now my odds are much less than that. So I know that God is going to come through for me," and when you're sure that God is going to come through for you, God comes through for you.

But loved ones, it has to be in your heart, see? See, it can't be you here saying, "I feel I feel a feeling that I feel I felt before, I do, I do. I feel something uncomfortable about this, just as you talk about it Pastor, I just, if I can just keep this from falling out of my heart before I get to Monday morning", -- that's not it. The fact is God looks for your faith in him being the God of encouragement. He looks for it in your heart. He's no fool. He looks deep down in your heart. He sees whether there's a tremor there, whether you're just hoping for the best or whether you really have faith and confidence that he who did this for Gideon will do the same for you. God looks into your heart.

I'll give you a little example of it, it was a mom that was going to have a Montana I think, you remember in the Old Testament, and maybe you'll look at it, it's in Genesis 18. And you remember God had given a promise that Abraham and Sarah would have a son.

Genesis 18:9, "They said to him, 'Where is Sarah, your wife?'" These were the servants, the angels that God had sent. "And he said, 'She is in the tent.' The Lord said, 'I will surely return to you in the spring, and Sarah your wife shall have a son.'" Now Sarah was 90 of course you remember and Abraham was 100. "And Sarah was listening at the tent door behind him. Now Abraham and Sarah were old, advanced in age; it had ceased to be with Sarah after the manner of women. So Sarah laughed to herself, saying, 'After I have grown old, and my husband is old, shall I have pleasure?'"

The Lord said to Abraham, "Why did Sarah laugh, and say, 'Shall I indeed bear a child, now that I am old?' Is anything too hard for the Lord? At the appointed time I will return to you, in the spring, and Sarah shall have a son." But Sarah denied, saying, 'I did not laugh'; for she was afraid. He said, 'No, but you did laugh.'" And it's just a lovely picture of God you know, "No, you laughed and I heard you laugh." But God looks in your heart, you see. He looks in your heart and mind and he knows whether you believe him or not, he does. He knows whether you laughed or not, he knows whether you're real, he knows whether you're just hoping for the best. He knows whether you're just trying out this faith game, he knows whether you believe that story about Gideon and whether you believe

he's the same and thinks the same about you. God knows that.

God looks into your heart and he looks there to find the faith that he is a God of encouragement who acts and backs up what he says. Now how do you get that kind of faith? Well, first of all be clear what that kind of faith is. It's not hoping that things will turn out right. It's not hoping for the best. It's not having mental theories about faith. It's not exercising the power of positive thinking. In fact, it's strange -- it's not looking forward at all. Real faith is looking back. Real faith is a confidence of what has already happened.

Now I'll show you that verse though I think you've looked at it before but I'd like you to look at it again loved ones. It states it clearly in Galatians 6:14. "But far be it from me to glory except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world." Faith is an absolute confidence that that is true, that the world has been crucified to me. That is, Gideon had an absolute confidence that in eternity, in timeless spaceless eternity, God had put all those Malachites and Jebusites, and had destroyed them there in Christ. And that was all already done and that was able to be manifested in time and space here as soon as one person believed it, that's it.

Faith is an absolute confidence that God has destroyed the powers in this world that are trying to destroy your life, that's it. So you think you know whether it's a boss or whether it's your finances or whether it's sickness in your body or whether it's your career or all the many people that seem to be messing up your life, God has taken them, put them into his Son, destroyed them and their power to affect your life adversely. And the moment you believe that, he works a miracle. He manifests that right here in time and space.

Do you realize that heaven exists at this moment? I mean otherwise where is my grandmother and your grandmother? Heaven exists at this moment. Do you realize that God is able at this moment to manifest heaven right here, right at this moment, see? He's able to manifest it right here in this part of time and space at this moment.

I mean H.G. Wells is right -- there is such a thing as a time machine. It is far beyond man's control but God is able to do that because he dwells in one great eternal present moment of timelessness, not in the midst of our changing time and space. So faith is an absolute confidence that God has already destroyed you in him. Has already disentangled all the messes that are in your life and the moment you believe that and begin to walk forth in that confidence, that God is going to manifest that, that frees God to manifest it.

But it's nothing to do with the industry averages. You know the industry averages are what we study in business: what will our restaurant be likely to do in that location at this time and this date of the American economy. It's nothing to do with it. The industry average is, we'd have insured that Gideon was absolutely wiped out and never heard of again. So it has nothing to do with it. It is a different realm, and I'll show you it again with Abraham if you remember about the son. It's in Romans, the comment on it is in Romans 4:18. And loved ones, if you let God implant this in your heart, it'll deliver you from a lot of anxiety and torture.

Romans 4:18, "In hope", this was you remember if you like to go back, I am sorry, to Romans 4:16, "That is why it depends on faith, in order that the promise may rest on grace and be guaranteed to all his descendants" -- the promise that he would have a son -- " not only to the adherents of the law but also to those who share the faith of Abraham, for he is the father of us all, as it is

written, 'I have made you the father of many nations' - in the presence of the God in whom he believed, who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist."

Romans 4:18, "In hope he believed against hope, that he should become the father of many nations; as he had been told, 'So shall your descendants be.'" Now do you see he didn't hope, he believed, he believed. He believed what God has said he had done. He believed that. Actually it says, "In hope he believed against hope", he had to believe against human hope. He had to look at his wife's body, 80-90 years old, his own body 100 years old. There was no human hope there. There was nothing in the appearance of the human circumstances that gave him hope. So he hoped against human hope, in divine hope, in divine confidence that God would manifest what he had done in Christ on Calvary, he believed.

Loved ones, it's nothing to do with looking at your family and thinking, "They're getting a bit better, they're getting a bit better, they're not getting a bit better", they're not. They're getting worse. Apart from God, they're just getting worse and there's no point in looking at your job situation thing, it's getting a bit better, it's not getting a bit better, the whole thing's on the way down. It's clear, it's obvious, the whole place is deteriorating. We all know that.

No, you don't tantalize and torture yourself or let Satan torture you by looking at the human circumstances and thinking, "it's getting a bit better", that's human hope and there's no hope for that human hope. You believe in divine hope, in divine expectation that God will be the God of encouragement to you and will manifest in time and space what he has done in Christ on Calvary. There's even more to it if you look at that next verse 19.

Romans 4:19, "He did not weaken in faith when he considered his own body, which was as good as dead because he was about a hundred years old, or when he considered the barrenness of Sarah's womb. No distrust made him waver concerning the promise of God, but he grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God". Now loved ones, you all know where he is living. I mean you've been there. He did not weaken in faith when he considered his own body, which was as good as dead because he was about 100 years old.

You know you and me. "Abraham, Abraham, don't look at your body, don't look at your body, it'll spoil your faith, don't look at your body, don't look at Sarah. Don't look at that other young lady, don't look at Sarah, don't, it'll spoil your faith." That's where we are, isn't it? It's a kind of game we're playing.

"Yeah, yeah my mother is well, yeah". She is dying but we say, "Yeah, she's well, she's well", because we are trying to whistle a little song in the dark. We try to whistle a little song, keep our eyes from looking at the hard facts as we call them. Do you see that's not faith? Faith is looking straight in the face of the facts. Looking at the age of Sarah's body and it's barren and there hadn't been a child there for years. Looking at his own body, 100 years old, almost worn out, almost dead. Looking straight at that, looking straight at the 135,000 of the enemy and looking at your own 300 men, it's looking plainly at the facts and not trying to pretend that they've been crucified or they look crucified. See, that's what we do.

We're looking at the facts and we're saying, "Does it look kind of crucified, if it kind of looks as if it's weakening, maybe I can believe for total victory." No, it's looking at the facts and saying, "This isn't crucified. Look, it's plain there. This is why it is such a mess. It has not been crucified yet, but I know it has been crucified in Christ and if I will just believe that, that will

be manifested here in time and space." But you see it's looking at the facts as they are.

The facts are as they are here in this world because nobody has to believe the real reality into them. Actually those aren't the facts. That is just permitted by God to show us what would have happened if we had never had the world crucified in Christ. And what we're looking at is actually a before picture. And the after picture is in Christ, at the right hand of God. And the moment we believe the after picture, it takes over and replaces the before picture, but it will do it through us plainly looking at the things as they appear to be and yet believing what God has done in Christ.

But loved ones, it is that. It isn't this mental game playing that we're going through you know, "I am trying to buoy up my faith" you're not. You're not buoying up your faith at all. You're not strengthening your faith. Your faith comes from looking at what God has done in Christ and looking at Psalms like Psalm 91, that's a great Psalm, just read that and memorize it. The Lord is your refuge. He is your fortress and if you begin to live in the light of that, you will find him manifesting himself in that way.

Now if you say to me, "Yeah, yeah, well I don't have any armies to lead and I don't have lots of Malachites and Jebusites," no, but you know you have bank accounts that wobble. You have a job that is up and down, you have a company that looks as if it's going to make it and might not make it. You have family situations that are all right today and then they're gone tomorrow. You have a hundred thousand natural shocks that places heir to you. Remember Shakespeare said, "The thousand natural shocks that flesh is heir to." We're facing them everyday and our Father wants us to face them in absolute confidence that he has already taken care of them and the moment he sees our heart steady in that faith, that he is a God of encouragement, then he will manifest that power in your life.

Let me just ask you, if you were a dad, if you were a dad and you took your little boy for a walk and you ended up going through a dark forest, and you were reassuring him, "Son, my arm is around you, nothing will hurt you." And you knew full well that nothing could hurt him, that you could take care of anything in that forest and you saw him nervous, biting his nails, worried and anxious with knots in his stomach and all kinds of little tremors in his heart. You know how you'd feel. You'd feel my son doesn't trust me. He doesn't trust me. He has no need to fear like that. He has no need but he doesn't trust me. That's the situation.

When you have knots in your tummy about the job, when you get discouraged about school, the Father feels that way. He feels, "but look I have sorted all this out in Jesus. I have already fixed all this. Why do you even spend a moment of worry? I am the God of encouragement who is anxious to act on your behalf. All you have to do is believe that I have already acted and I will act now in your life." And brothers and sisters, would you consider stopping looking at the things in your life and thinking that you have to handle it yourself? Would you stop doing that? Would you see that God has already acted on your behalf and he will act on your behalf so that you will see it during this coming week. Let us pray.

Dear Father, we bring before you the things that we have allowed to discourage us. Lord, we're ashamed, it's nothing like as bad as facing 135,000 men with just 300 soldiers, it's nothing like as bad as that. But Lord, we've allowed it to grow and grow and worry us and worry us until it seems almost as if we're destroyed by fear itself. It seems as if we've been discouraged just by the machinations of our own minds. Father, we ask you to forgive us.

We see that we're rank cards that we would dream of getting discouraged in this situation that we

face. Lord, we believe you are our refuge and our fortress. We believe you are the God of encouragement and we believe that if you destroyed 135,000 men with only 300, then you can certainly take care of the odds that we are facing. And so Father we want now to commit this situation into your hands. We believe that it was crucified with Christ and we believe Lord that if we commit our way unto you, you will act. And so we are committing our way now into your hands and we trust you to act and this very moment now, we stop worrying. We stop being discouraged, we stop being anxious and now we're going to face into the wind here and we're going to walk straight towards this situation in absolute confidence and encouragement that you will act mightily for us in Jesus' name.

And now the grace of our Lord Jesus and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with each one of us now, and throughout this week. Amen.