



TREASURES OF
Encouragement
WOMEN HELPING WOMEN

SHARON W. BETTERS



While reading Sharon Better's passionate appeal to practice the privilege of God-glorifying, Spirit-empowered, biblical encouragement, my heart was arrested. I closed the book to contact a hurting friend. *Treasures of Encouragement* has the potential to transform churches into powerhouses of Christ's compassion and love. May it be so!

—**Leslie Bennett**, Speaker, Author, *Leader Connection* (Blog)
Content Manager, *Revive Our Hearts*; Editor, *Women's Ministry Leader Survival Guide* and *10 Truths to Set Leaders Free*

Treasures of Encouragement is a timely reminder of the power of God's Word to change a life and to make the impossible doable. I appreciated the encouragement to look around and see that I have a part in helping the Lord to comfort the wounded and restore the hurting. I heartily recommend this book to anyone who wants to experience more of the grace of God.

—**Annie Chapman**, Singer; Speaker; Author, *Letting Go of Anger* and *The Mother-in-Law Dance*

Out of personal and profound grief, Sharon Better has written a classic that is a must-have for every Christian's library. In it, she lays out the essential aspects of a church whose culture is fueled by biblical encouragement and shows what it means to be part of a congregation that is a safe place of grace—that allows Christians to make mistakes, fall down, get up, and continue to grow together in Christ.

—**Melanie Cogdill**, General Editor, *Beyond the Roles*; Member, The Pelican Project

Biblical encouragers helped me to climb out of a dark depression, so I love how this book reminds readers that all God's children are called to be encouragers. In a self-centered and broken world, the combination of real-life personal stories and biblical focus reminds us that coming alongside one another is a privilege. I am grateful for the emphasis Sharon places on the power of Scripture to comfort others when we don't know what to say. I hope that

many read this book and know that they too are equipped and called to be God's promise keepers through the practice of biblical encouragement.

—**Jan Dravecky**, Cofounder, Endurance with Jan and Dave Dravecky; Author; Speaker

Encouragement is a gift, a treasure both to give and to receive from the body of Christ. Sharon Betters unpacks what this biblical encouragement looks like in the life of a believer. Using personal stories of those who entered into her own sorrow or who received this treasure from the godly, as well as Christ-centered teaching from Scripture, Betters equips readers to walk beside the hurting. May we show the world who Christ is as we encourage one another with the mutual hope we have in Christ.

—**Christina Fox**, Counselor; Speaker; Author, *Closer Than a Sister*

With practical wisdom that nourishes the parched and brittle soul, Sharon introduces us to real women with real struggles. Through their stories she challenges us to think biblically about our own struggles while infusing the hope needed to navigate them.

—**Vanessa K. Hawkins**, Director of Women's Ministry, First Presbyterian Church, Augusta, Georgia; Speaker; Cohost, *Something to Talk About* podcast

To encourage is to inspire courage, hope, or confidence. Twenty-five years ago, I picked up *Treasures of Encouragement* as a young pastor's wife who was desperately looking for these comforts. The truths contained within these covers have stood the test of time and personally sustained me. I am delighted to endorse this new edition of *Treasures of Encouragement*.

—**Karen Hodge**, Coordinator of Women's Ministries, Presbyterian Church in America; Author, *Transformed* and *Life-giving Leadership*

Sharon's theological integrity and her personal pilgrimage through pain harmonize into a glorious doxology.

—**Susan Hunt**, Author, *Spiritual Mothering* and *Aging with Grace*

People often ask me how to walk alongside friends who are hurting. Practical, honest, and steeped in Scripture, this book provides better answers than anything else I have read. I have turned to it again and again, both for comfort in my own suffering as well as for ideas for ministering to others. I read the original twenty-three years ago, shortly after my son died, and it was truly a treasure of encouragement to me. Sharon's words shaped my thinking and helped me to press into the Lord as I wrestled with questions, doubts, and fear. I am indebted to her for this work, and after you read *Treasures of Encouragement*, you will be too. I highly recommend it!

—**Vaneetha Rendall Risner**, Author, *Walking through Fire* and *The Scars That Have Shaped Me*

Deeply moving, compelling, and extremely practical.

—**Stephen Smallman**, Author, *Beginnings* and *The Walk*

Sharon Betters taught me about lament. This book is a discipleship treasure for practical encouragement in hard seasons. It equipped junior-high girls to boldly serve one another and me when my sister passed away. *Treasures of Encouragement* still gives me courage. I am a debtor to the way God faithfully uses Sharon's suffering by His mercy for the ministry of encouragement in my life.

—**Barbara Thompson**, Author, *Equipping the Church for Kingdom Prayer*; Coauthor, *The Legacy of Biblical Womanhood*

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P U B L I S H I N G
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A leader's guide for this book is available
at the PCA Bookstore (www.pcabookstore.com).

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This book is written with thanksgiving to God for my greatest earthly encourager, Chuck, whose lifetime hunger and thirst for God's righteousness encouraged our son Mark to prepare for the greatest experience of his life—to be with Jesus and to be like Jesus.

And for my friend, Diane Walker

From the first day we met to the day she stepped into heaven thirty-one years later, Diane taught me the meaning of biblical encouragement. She loved me unconditionally and refused to leave my side in the darkest days. I know she is in that great cloud of witnesses, continuing to cheer on her loved ones and me.

*“I will go before you and will level the mountains;
I will break down gates of bronze and cut through bars of iron.
I will give you the treasures of darkness, riches stored in secret places, so that you may know that I am the Lord, the God of Israel, who summons you by name.”*

(Isaiah 45:2–3)

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FOREWORD

It's one thing to write a book. It's another thing to live the principles in the book for twenty-five years after it is published. The ministry of encouragement is still the passion of Sharon's life.

This book was written in the crucible of suffering after the death of Sharon's sixteen-year-old son Mark and his friend Kelly in an automobile accident. At the time of the accident, Sharon was on our women's ministry leadership committee for the Presbyterian Church in America. The women on this committee lived in different parts of the country but our hearts were connected by our love for the Lord, His Word, and His church and by our desire to equip women to live for God's glory. We were gospel friends. It was agonizing to watch our friend grieve. Her grief was deep. It was raw. Sometimes it was scary. But deep in my soul I believed God would bring light from the darkness to guide others. The first time I said this out loud to Sharon, she responded, "I don't want to help others; I want Mark back." I had spoken too quickly. I needed someone to teach me to be an encourager.

In time, our conversations were sprinkled with ways she was experiencing encouragement from others and how sometimes the silence of others discouraged her deeply. We concluded that silence is usually the result of not knowing what to do or say. Through it all, the dominant theme I heard from Sharon was how the Lord was encouraging her through His Word. My heart longed for her to help me to understand the treasures in the darkness (Isaiah 45:2–3) she was discovering. I began to see a glimmer of desire in her to help women in the church to know how to encourage others. Our committee trembled when we asked her to write a book on encouragement because we knew we were asking for a costly gift.

Treasures of Encouragement

Sharon gave us practical ways to be encouragers, and she gave us a biblical reason to be encouragers. She taught us to think biblically about the ministry of encouragement. The result was transformative, for me and countless other women. I am a witness to the beauty of women applying the encouragement of the gospel to the wounds of hurting women and to the covenant community becoming stronger, safer, and sweeter. This book is Sharon's sacrifice of praise. Her theological integrity and her personal pilgrimage through pain harmonize into a glorious doxology.

I'm grateful for this new edition of *Treasures of Encouragement*. I pray the legacy of encouragement will now be given to the next generation of women.

Susan Hunt

INTRODUCTION

On July 6, 1993, our family enjoyed a quiet evening at home—an evening we soon would have forgotten were it not for the events that followed. Ten minutes after our sixteen-year-old son, Mark, and his friend, Kelly, left our home, they died in a car accident.

Shattered by the intrusion of death, I soon learned why Scripture calls it our enemy (1 Corinthians 15:26). Every day brought reminders of Mark's physical absence—an empty bedroom, an untouched jacket, his dog patiently waiting on the bed, his brothers and sister wailing loudly or quietly weeping.

When God's promises of sufficiency, joy, and peace seemed far away and impossible for Him to keep in the aftermath of death's defilement, I found hope in Isaiah 45:2-3:

I will go before you and will level the mountains; I will
break down gates of bronze and cut through bars of iron.
I will give you the treasures of darkness, riches stored in
secret places, so that you may know that I am the Lord,
the God of Israel, who summons you by name.

And I found comfort in Lamentations 3:22-23:

His compassions never fail. They are new every morning;
great is your faithfulness.

The healing balm of encouragement eventually stopped the spread of despair's infection and began replacing it with hope's healthy glow. God's Word was the healing balm, and God's people applied it lavishly to soothe the searing pain in my soul.

Biblical encouragement is soul work. God unleashes its myste-

rious power every time a child of God follows the Holy Spirit's direction and steps into the suffering of another person. Individuals, families, and churches need it regularly to maintain spiritual health. And both the encouraged and the encourager are changed through its application. Scriptural encouragers invest in their own spiritual welfare every time they give of themselves to another.

Encouragement can be as simple as smiling warmly at an awkward adolescent or as complex as walking through the shadow of death with a disease-ravaged friend. Its power is limitless and its practice is a privilege.

Believers often feel guilty when the need for encouragement is raised. How many times have you lamented, "I know I should be more of an encourager, but . . ." or "I wish someone would encourage me." Rather than reach confidently into our treasure chest of salvation to find just the right encouragement jewel for our child or friend, we selfishly close the lid, hoarding the treasures for ourselves. And we miss the opportunity to make a difference.

The premise of this book is that when Christ is in us, we have the treasures of His encouragement at our fingertips. And when we obey the encouragement mandate, the treasures we give are multiplied in our own lives. It's a win-win situation.

This is not a textbook on encouragement. It is a passionate plea for the lavish use of encouragement. Its application continually restores my soul, and I want others to experience that restoration.

As children of God, we have every tool we need to mend broken hearts and lives. So instead of isolating ourselves in a self-made cocoon of protection, we need to find out what those tools are, learn how to use them, and get to work reviving hope in hurting hearts.

Women who know Christ and the power of His resurrection realize that God does not leave us helpless in the face of difficulty. He miraculously transforms our meager offerings and uses even the simplest acts to bring about dramatic change.

Although this book was written from the crucible of suffering, it is not about grief. It is about how God uses us—His children—to

do soul work as we become His promise keepers. It is about the privilege of giving to others from the treasure chest of our salvation. And its purpose is to help women to

- think biblically about their position in Christ
- live biblically as the treasures of encouragement emerge from this new way of thinking

Part 1, “Thinking Biblically,” lays the Scriptural foundation for such actions.

Part 2, “Living Biblically,” looks at specific ways to encourage. Many women want to encourage but need help in figuring out creative ways to do it.¹ Following part 2 is an addendum of fifty practical encouragement ideas.

Each chapter opens with one or more true encouragement stories. Many women submitted to me their real-life stories, some of which have been edited to protect the privacy of the storyteller. Numerous personal accounts are also scattered throughout the text. Each chapter includes an Encouragement Principle, six days of daily devotions, and a specific way to practice encouragement or cultivate intimacy with Christ. Before reading each chapter, ask God to open your heart to His message for you. Underline, or copy on note cards, the statements that God impresses on your heart as you read and complete the study questions. Journaling your way through the text and Scripture will clarify the encouragement principles and applications to your life. Of course, the more time you take to think through the probing questions, the more impact the study will have on you.

My prayer is for renewed strength in the body of Christ as we begin giving to others the treasures of His encouragement, thus becoming God’s promise keepers.

¹ This book was written for individual readers as well as for small group study. A separate leader’s guide expands the material and explains how to lead a small group. It is available through the PCA Bookstore (www.pcabookstore.com).

Part 1

Thinking Biblically

Chapter One

PRICELESS TREASURES OF ENCOURAGEMENT

Aleta's Story

From the time my husband decided to leave me until it actually happened, many close friends tried to encourage me with well-meaning words. “He won’t leave,” they assured me. “He knows he has a good thing with you. It’s a phase!”

Although I appreciated their good intentions, the words rang hollow. I knew that God doesn’t always grant happy endings—not even to Christians. My well-intentioned friends had no biblical basis for their reassuring statements.

Then God gave me a friend whose faith of steel had been forged in the heat of tough times. She had an unorthodox response to my story of broken dreams. “Your husband may very well leave you and your children,” she said. “So you need to ask yourself, ‘Will I trust God to care for us, husband or no husband?’”

The turning point in my fearful journey came when she directed me to submit my raging emotions to the truths and promises of God. Her words set me free because they helped me face reality. She had the courage to step into my pain and to encourage me with the only thing that could help—the truth.

Jane's Story

Chronic pain was affecting me emotionally and spiritually as well as physically. As my body grew tolerant to the medication, doctors increased the dosage from one or two pills a day to eight

or ten. But the pain remained the same. The only things that changed were my feelings of loneliness and helplessness; they continued to increase.

Then a special Christian sister stepped into my life. She always seemed to know when to call or send a card. She took me out on Friday nights “just to talk,” and she gave me a “joy box” in which I kept many of the treasures of encouragement she sent to me.

My pain finally drove me to search for treatment in a psychiatric hospital. A Christian roommate assured me that God had not abandoned me. I asked God to teach me how to love and serve Him on His terms. I asked Him to take my eyes off of myself and my pain and to help me focus on others. As I diligently prayed for God to teach me how to die to self, I received another special treasure. He eventually removed my physical pain!

The time has come for me to give a “joy box” to someone else and to fill it with treasures of encouragement—the way God, through my friend, encouraged me.

Encouragement Principle 1

God keeps His promises
through other believers.

The news was like an explosion in the heart of our home. Our sixteen-year-old son, Mark, and his girlfriend, Kelly, had been killed. The darkest night of my soul had begun. God’s promises mocked my sorrow. How could I ever trust Him again?

The answer came through a body of believers who functioned as God’s promise keepers. Feeling betrayed by God, I refused to acknowledge His love for me, but God demonstrated that love through His physical representation on earth—the church.

From the moment people learned of Mark’s death, they began sending cards and personal notes of encouragement. These along

with their gifts of practical service were our lifeline to the reality of God's character.

Before Mark's death I had taught for many years on the subject of encouragement, but my beliefs had never been tested in the laboratory of grief. My own experience caused me to wonder how many people in the body of Christ have not healed from life's devastating blows simply because the other members of the body are not fulfilling their duty to encourage.

Because my husband was the pastor of our church, we received much support. Many people stretched themselves to find ways to minister to us. Others, however, treated us as if we were lepers. And some of those who avoided us were people I thought would never let us down. Why? There had to be a good reason.

I had to look only as far as my own life to find clues, for I am not innocent in the disregard of encouragement. Sometimes I am caring and sensitive. I send cards with special notes, make phone calls, take a meal to a housebound mom, greet the newly widowed with a hug, and speak encouragingly to my husband and children.

At other times, however, I am not such a good friend. I neglect to send a card, acknowledge the death of a loved one, or hug the parent of a rebellious child. I guide conversations away from deep needs toward trivial matters, and I even forget my promises to pray. The longer I neglect the need, the more embarrassed I am to see the friend I disappointed.

Why do I disregard such simple means of encouragement? Why do so many others refuse to get involved beyond a superficial level in the lives of struggling believers? Why do we often view these commands as drudgery and resent obeying them? Why do we neglect such a great opportunity? Five reasons come to mind:

1. *Our own lives are full of urgent demands.*
2. *We don't know what to say or do, so we decide it is better to say or do nothing than to say or do the wrong thing.*
3. *We give up when our initial efforts show no results.*

4. *We are insensitive.*

These explanations are all variations of the one real reason we fail to encourage one another:

5. *We do not understand our identity in Christ.*

As our understanding of our stature as God's children increases, our reasons for failing to encourage others fall away. When the Word of God defines our identity and when our intimacy with Christ determines our character, not only will we know how to display God's love to others, we will desire to do so as well.

Rather than risk intimacy with Christ, however, we try to pass the buck. To ease the guilt of noninvolvement, we charge the church with the job of meeting needs. We forget that we are the church!

In congregations where believers think of their church as a living organism—a body—rather than as just an institution, the church pulsates with hope and healing. When church members practice the ministry of encouragement that flows from intimacy with Christ, the church becomes a healing place for wounded believers and a magnet to seekers.

The Meaning of Encouragement

One dictionary¹ defines *encourage* this way: "To give courage, spirit, or hope; to stimulate."

Courage: "Mental or moral strength to venture, persevere, and withstand danger, fear, or difficulty."

Spirit: "The activating or essential principle influencing a person."

Hope: "A desire accompanied by expectation of or belief in fulfillment."

Stimulate: "To excite to activity or growth."

Imagine being able to affect another person in such a powerful way. Many people today would have us believe that we can accom-

¹ Merriam Webster's *Collegiate Dictionary*, 10th ed. (Springfield, Mass.: Merriam-Webster, Inc., 1994).

plish this with warm words and fuzzy feelings, but the scriptural practice of encouragement demands much more. Scriptural encouragement is ongoing, daily, and consistent. It requires perseverance, and it includes the following practices:

Strengthening: “And we urge you, brothers, warn those who are idle, encourage the timid, help the weak, be patient with everyone” (1 Thessalonians 5:14).

Motivating: “Now go out and encourage your men. I swear by the Lord that if you don’t go out, not a man will be left with you by nightfall. This will be worse for you than all the calamities that have come upon you from your youth till now” (2 Samuel 19:7).

Assuring: “But your assistant, Joshua son of Nun, will enter it. Encourage him, because he will lead Israel to inherit it” (Deuteronomy 1:38).

Exhorting: “When he arrived and saw the evidence of the grace of God, he was glad and encouraged them all to remain true to the Lord with all their hearts” (Acts 11:23).

Supporting: “. . . learn to do right! Seek justice, encourage the oppressed. Defend the cause of the fatherless, plead the case of the widow” (Isaiah 1:17).

Disciplining: “See to it, brothers, that none of you has a sinful, unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God. But encourage one another daily, as long as it is called Today, so that none of you may be hardened by sin’s deceitfulness. We have come to share in Christ if we hold firmly till the end the confidence we had at first. As has just been said: ‘Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts as you did in the rebellion’” (Hebrews 3:12–15).

True encouragement pumps hope into the receiver and also into the giver.

God’s Promise Keepers

When I was reeling from those haunting words, “Your son is dead,” how could I believe promises like this one in Hebrews: “God has said, ‘Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you’” (13:5)? In fact, how could I believe any of God’s other promises of security?

In the dark periods of life it is difficult to believe that God will keep His many promises. But He does, and He often does it through other believers whom He enables and charges with the responsibility of encouraging one another.

Long before the now-popular Promise Keepers' men's movement entered the scene, God established that *all* His children would be promise keepers—*His* promise keepers.

Consider 2 Corinthians 1:3–5:

Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves have received from God. For just as the sufferings of Christ flow over into our lives, so also through Christ our comfort overflows.

God's compassion streaming through us and into others is His "divine solution" to the problems of discouragement, grief, and sorrow. God holds the members of His body responsible for making sure that other members experience His love:

A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another. (John 13:34–35)

When I was grieving the death of my son, the faithfulness of other believers soothed my hurting heart. When members of His body were faithful and entered my pain, God used their sensitive words, hugs, tears, and practical acts of service to demonstrate His presence. Without it, healing would have taken much longer. I imagined God saying to members of the body, *Sharon is missing Mark and feeling abandoned by Me. I promised her I would never forsake her, but grief blinds her to My presence. Be My ambassador and let Me love her through you. Write her a note, share your memories of Mark, pray for her right now. Be My promise keeper for this moment.*

God calls us to encourage those caught in the daily grind of life as well as those in crisis.

Consider the single mother overwhelmed by all the responsibilities resting on her. What is she thinking as she reads, “For this God is our God for ever and ever; he will be our guide even to the end” (Psalm 48:14) and “I am the Lord, your God, who takes hold of your right hand and says to you, Do not fear; I will help you” (Isaiah 41:13).

God can keep His promise to guide her; the wisdom she finds in His Word can keep her headed in the right direction. But how does He take hold of her right hand and tell her not to be afraid? He does it through other believers. He wants and expects our cooperation.

God commands older women to teach younger women how to live (Titus 2:3–5), and an important aspect of teaching is encouragement. Young women need the assurance that they are not alone and that they are doing many things right. I can imagine God prompting a mature believer with thoughts like this one: *That young mom is overwhelmed. Her fear of the unknown is all she can see. The sound of shattering dreams has made her deaf to My Word. Let her know she is not alone. Let My wisdom and love flow through you to her. Represent Me by helping her with the children or inviting her to dinner. Be My promise keeper for this hour in her life.*

My son’s kindergarten teacher encouraged me with this kind of hope during a particularly difficult stage in my son’s life. “Sharon,” she said, “my son is older now, so believe me when I say, ‘this too shall pass!’” With those few words, she calmed my fear, not with empty promises, but with knowledge from her own experience. God used her to guide me through the maze of parenting.

The miracle of encouragement is that God can use even simple acts to effect dramatic change. A smile, a kind word, a touch on the shoulder. When those gestures emanate from a heart that truly wants to emulate Christ, the Holy Spirit uses them to instill courage, spirit, and hope—both in the receiver and in the giver.

In my own journey through grief, every act of kindness toward me and my family was a brick on the pathway leading toward God.

No one could take away our pain, but God used each block of encouragement, no matter how small the giver thought it was, to take us one step closer to His healing.

But sometimes encouragement calls for more than a smile, a note, or a kind word. Sometimes it calls for commitment and sacrifice.

Why We Encourage

The ministry of encouragement requires a deep and personal relationship to Jesus Christ, and it demands a lifestyle of servanthood that is rooted in the Incarnation. Authentic scriptural encouragement is a response to God's work in our lives. Because of what Christ has done for us, we are to encourage others (Hebrews 10:24–25). In Philippians 2:1–4 Paul instructs the church to respond to one another with humility and love *because of the comfort of the love of Jesus*. He tells the Thessalonians to “Encourage one another with these words” (1 Thessalonians 4:18). What words? The promise of eternity with the Lord.

Hebrews 10 tells us that the foundation for the ministry of encouragement is our own redemption. Because we have been forgiven, “there is no longer any sacrifice for sin. Therefore, . . . since we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus, . . . let us consider how we may spur one another toward love and good deeds. Let us not give up meeting together . . . but let us encourage one another” (Hebrews 10:18–25).

The word *consider* (v. 24) means “to observe fully: behold, discover, perceive.” This is not a description of a superficial relationship or a quick fix. Biblical encouragement requires time and effort. In response to God's great love for us, we will get to know others so we can discern the best way to stimulate them to reflect the character of Christ. Our motive in encouragement is their good, not ours.

The Greek word translated *spur* (v. 24) in the NIV is *paroxumo*, which means “to sharpen alongside.” To help people reach their potential as children of God requires that we come “alongside” of

them. This is the same ministry as that of our Comforter, the Holy Spirit, who comes alongside as our encourager. Proverbs speaks of this principle: “As iron sharpens iron, so one man sharpens another” (27:17).

The phrase *give up* (v. 25) means “to leave behind in some place” or “to desert.” In other words, we must not desert those who lag behind. We are responsible for one another’s well-being.

Gail MacDonald writes about how Jesus encouraged His disciples:

Jesus prepared the way for these men by going before them at important moments in their lives together. He saw to it that the Upper Room was arranged in order that they might enjoy strength-giving fellowship. After they had failed, he made sure they received the message that he would go ahead of them and meet them in Galilee. This message was especially to be delivered word-of-mouth to Peter because he would need comfort more than anyone. Later, after another night of failure, the Lord was kind enough to prepare a breakfast for a group of tired and chilly fisherman/disciples before they reached the shore. And he has gone before us all to prepare a home in heaven. Could one of the reasons we find being a comforter-friend so difficult today be the time and forethought it requires—time and forethought we are unable or unwilling to give?²

The miracle of encouragement takes place as we develop intimacy with Christ. Intimacy with Him teaches us the importance of connecting with one another, which naturally will lead us into deeper and more meaningful relationships. The spiritual needs of people in our circle of influence are made clear as a result of our time spent with Christ.

Imagine the unity and public testimony of churches if obedience to Hebrews 10:24 were the norm: “And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds.” Instead of

² Gail MacDonald, *A Step Farther and Higher* (Portland, Ore.: Multnomah, 1993), 180.

demeaning a volunteer for doing an inadequate job, we will search for a place where she can succeed. Imagine the harmony in our homes if we were to give encouragement a place of prominence. Think of what might happen if smiles and hugs for a moody teenager were a more natural response than critical words.

The possibilities for positive influence are endless.

The Poke Cake

The recipe for the once-popular “poke cake” calls for poking holes in a baked cake and pouring liquid, flavored gelatin over the top. The color and flavor of the gelatin penetrate the cake in a way that is similar to how the life of Jesus permeates our lives. The time we spend with Him in His Word and in His service are the holes into which His Spirit pours His character. When our lives are broken and given in service to others, the vibrant attributes of Christ add beauty and flavor to our own bland nature.

Time spent listening to God, seeking His wisdom, talking to Him, obeying Him, and stepping out by faith to encourage others will cultivate intimacy with Christ and result in His character being revealed in us. When our obedience flows from a deepening awareness of our position in Christ, His presence in us will be evident to those around us.

The finished work of Christ is our motivation. Through the ministry of encouragement, we offer to others what we have found in Him.

If you cooperate in this lifelong process, do not be surprised someday when a friend tells you about words you do not remember speaking that changed her life and set her heart toward God. Do not be surprised when a friend reveals that your quiet presence, at a time when you felt helpless in the face of her great calamity, gave her a sense of peace and the joy of God’s nearness.

In the horrendous grief I experienced after the death of my son and his friend, the body of Christ became God’s physical arms, holding me tightly in His grip. God gave me the treasure of their scriptural encouragement, forcing me to acknowledge His faithful-

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ness, drawing me from dark anger and sorrow into the glimmering light of His eyes of love.

Throughout this book you will read stories about people whose lives radically changed when someone obeyed the Holy Spirit and encouraged them. Will you listen and offer to another person the treasure of encouragement? Will you be God's promise keeper?

Getting Focused

- 1 Define encouragement.
- 2 How do you encourage others?
- 3 What encourages you?

Staying Focused

Day One

- 1 Read John 15:1–17. Jesus calls on each of us to bear fruit. What is the prerequisite for bearing fruit? (v. 4)
- 2 What is the motivation for bearing fruit? (vv. 9–10)
- 3 What changes in your life will you make to cultivate your relationship to Christ?

Day Two

- 1 Read Ephesians 3:7–21. What was the driving force in Paul's life? (vv. 7–9)
- 2 What is God's purpose for the church? (vv. 10–11)
- 3 Who is the church?
- 4 In your circle of influence how are you fulfilling God's purpose for the church?
- 5 Paul says, "For this reason I kneel before the Father" (v. 14). Why did Paul pray?
- 6 What did Paul pray? (vv. 16–20)
- 7 Using Paul's prayer as a guide, write out a prayer for yourself. (For example, "Because of the great gift of salvation, I pray that your glorious riches will strengthen me with power through your Spirit in my inner being.")

Day Three

- 1 Read Philippians 3:7–16. What is the driving force in Paul’s life? (vv. 7–11)
- 2 Did his passion for God make obedience easy or perfect? (vv. 12–14)
- 3 People often rationalize their refusal to serve God because they feel inadequate. Paul’s response to that excuse might be: “Only let us live up to what we have already attained” (v. 16). Are you obeying what you already know?
- 4 How should what you already know about Christ’s accomplishments affect your ministry of encouragement?
- 5 Who will you encourage today? Write a brief statement about how Christ, through you, can encourage that person. Now do it!

Day Four

- 1 Read Philippians 2:1–18. Paul calls on the Philippians to put aside their own interests in relationships. Why?
- 2 Ask God to show you what interests you need to put aside in order to serve Him.

Day Five

- 1 Read Titus 2. Before Paul outlines the godly behavior Titus is to teach, he exhorts him to teach sound doctrine. Why?
- 2 After Paul outlines some specific aspects of godly behavior, he states, “For the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men” (v. 11). What impact should this truth have on the way we live?
- 3 What is your motivation for doing good? (vv. 12–14)

Day Six

- 1 Read John 13:34–35. How has Jesus loved you? Be specific.
- 2 How are you loving those in your circle of influence? How will you love them? Be specific!

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Living Focused

Reread “Jane’s Story—The Gift of the Joy Box.” Ask God to bring to mind the name of a person in your circle of influence who needs a “joy box.” When you give this gift, commit to filling it with treasures of encouragement—notes, cards, small tokens of love. Allow God to use you to keep His promises to her.