

Discouragement and encouragement - Steve Wilkinson

I'm no expert on the ancient Hebrew culture, but I believe that, as I am writing, we are in the time between Passover and the Festival of Weeks (which celebrates the grain harvest). For the ancient Hebrews, that harvest started during Passover and lasted seven weeks. [Leviticus 23:16](#) tells the Israelites to count 50 days (seven weeks and a day), so, the day after the harvest completed there was a big celebration!

To us Christians, it's the time between Easter and Pentecost, which relates back to those Old Testament celebrations. So, the day of Pentecost is fifty days after Easter Sunday and the resurrection (hence, the word Pentecost means, literally, "fiftieth").

I've been thinking on how those seven weeks might have gone, after the very first Easter. What might the early Christians have been feeling and what might we learn from it?

Here's what it was like for two of the followers, on the day of resurrection:

[Luke 24:13-35](#)

¹³ Now that same day two of them were going to a village called Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem. ¹⁴ They were talking with each other about everything that had happened. ¹⁵ As they talked and discussed these things with each other, Jesus himself came up and walked along with them; ¹⁶ but they were kept from recognizing him.

¹⁷ He asked them, "What are you discussing together as you walk along?"

They stood still, their faces downcast. ¹⁸ One of them, named Cleopas, asked him, "Are you the only one visiting Jerusalem who does not know the things that have happened there in these days?"

¹⁹ "What things?" he asked.

"About Jesus of Nazareth," they replied. "He was a prophet, powerful in word and deed before God and all the people. ²⁰ The chief priests and our rulers handed him over to be sentenced to death, and they crucified him; ²¹ but we had hoped that he was the one who was going to redeem Israel. And what is more, it is the third day since all this took place. ²² In addition, some of our women amazed us. They went to the tomb early this morning ²³ but didn't find his body. They came and told us that they had seen a vision of angels, who said he was alive. ²⁴ Then some of our companions went to the tomb and found it just as the women had said, but they did not see Jesus."

²⁵ He said to them, "How foolish you are, and how slow to believe all that the prophets have spoken! ²⁶ Did not the Messiah have to suffer these things and then enter his glory?" ²⁷ And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself.

²⁸ As they approached the village to which they were going, Jesus continued on as if he were going farther. ²⁹ But they urged him strongly, "Stay with us, for it is nearly evening; the day is almost over." So he went in to stay with them.

³⁰ When he was at the table with them, he took bread, gave thanks, broke it and began to give it to them.

³¹ Then their eyes were opened and they recognized him, and he disappeared from their sight. ³² They asked each other, "Were not our hearts burning within us while he talked with us on the road and opened the Scriptures to us?"

³³ They got up and returned at once to Jerusalem. There they found the Eleven and those with them, assembled together ³⁴ and saying, "It is true! The Lord has risen and has appeared to Simon." ³⁵ Then the two told what had happened on the way, and how Jesus was recognized by them when he broke the bread.

In verses 17 and 18, Cleopas' words, together with the pair's demeanour, seems to express disappointment and discouragement. A little further on, in verse 21, "...but we had hoped..." (that's in the past tense: presumably, they had given up that hope) "...that he was the one who was going to redeem Israel." Surely, that is, indeed, why Jesus

died on the cross: so that redemption is available to Israel, yes, but in its fullness, to all. In a sense Jesus was doing what they were hoping for, it just wasn't working out how they expected. He wasn't getting rid of the Romans, rather he was saving souls.

In [John 20:19](#), we're told:

On the evening of that first day of the week, when the disciples were together, with the doors locked for fear of the Jewish leaders, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you!" ... Then, in verse 26: A week later his disciples were in the house again, and Thomas was with them. Though the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you!"

To me, it sounds like the eleven disciples were in lockdown, perhaps something like we are, though for different reasons. I wonder if the other Christian followers were in their own homes, feeling leaderless, insecure, with no direction. The Lord Jesus appeared to the eleven, to calm and encourage, but for the most part, they appear to have been motivated by fear and discouragement. Perhaps that's not surprising, following on from the then recent events. For years, the Lord Jesus had been teaching, preaching, healing, delivering, sharing the common life: a very real, physical presence. Now he was gone. He reappeared at times, but then he was gone again. It must have seemed very different: no Jesus and, as yet, no Pentecost with the arrival of the Holy Spirit.

Paul must have gleaned some insight into the situation as he wrote, in [1 Corinthians 15:3-6](#):

³For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, ⁴that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, ⁵and that he appeared to Cephas, and then to the Twelve. ⁶After that, he appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers and sisters at the same time, most of whom are still living, though some have fallen asleep...

Jesus appeared to more than 500 believers, in one instance: that must have been quite an occasion: it would have been something to remember, something which had a profound effect on the followers!

Then, in [Acts 1:15](#):

In those days Peter stood up among the believers (a group numbering about a hundred and twenty).

So, if we can believe the details, somewhere in those seven weeks, the followers diminished in numbers from over 500 to about 120. It seems that three quarters of the church fizzled away. Gone fishing, a shopping spree, down the pub, watching the telly...

I get the feeling that, around this time, the early church was under tremendous pressure. Perhaps the enemy realised that he had a window of opportunity to cripple the church leaders with fear, crush the lost followers and, hence, to stamp out the faith, in its infancy.

Turn forwards a page from [Acts 1:15](#) and there is [Acts 2](#) and Pentecost: an explosion of the Holy Spirit's visitation and the start of something new, which the book of Acts tells us much about. This, surely, puts into stark relief why those believers should have hung around and not just drifted away. On that day, three thousand souls turned to the Lord to be baptised and saved. The enemy was thwarted.

However, in each of the above-mentioned scriptures, Jesus came to them. "Peace be with you..." to the fearful disciples; or a friendly conversation, on the road to Emmaus, as two believers (who probably should have stayed in Jerusalem) were off on a road trip...

When I was much younger, the "space race" was in full swing. The Apollo programme was cracking on, to put a man on the moon. Cruising quietly on their way, each mission had moments when rocket thrust was used for "course correction", to bring the vehicle back on to the intended path. To my way of thinking, it seems that many of the Lord's appearances, between resurrection and ascension, were a sort of spiritual "course correction". People going off track; going in the wrong direction; discouraged; having come to the wrong conclusions; were gently met and helped back onto course. Eyes, ears and minds were opened, in a new way.

Perhaps this next passage of scripture shows something of why the early church missed the plot, during this time:

Matthew 16:21-23

²¹ From that time on Jesus began to explain to his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things at the hands of the elders, the chief priests and the teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life.

²² Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. “Never, Lord!” he said. “This shall never happen to you!”

²³ Jesus turned and said to Peter, “Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; you do not have in mind the concerns of God, but merely human concerns.”

Those words to Peter, in verse 23, must have seemed so harsh: I think they’d have floored me. In verse 21, there is bad news: “...that he must be killed...” but also good news: “...on the third day, be raised to life.” Peter reacted to the bad news. Perhaps, he didn’t listen long enough to hear the good news, being completely focused on what he didn’t want to hear. Maybe there’s a lesson to be learned: I must listen to the Lord’s complete message, without jumping to conclusions. I think, sometimes, that’s a difficult thing to do!

Coming back to that time between the resurrection and Pentecost, I think the early church was probably in a state of substantial discouragement, but then came Pentecost and it seems to have been a significant turning point. After Pentecost, was the church ever the same again? In a funny kind of way, I hope not. I think the indications given to us, as we read through the book of Acts show that it wasn’t a question of getting back to normal. There was, rather, a new normal. It was a question of moving forwards, with the Lord, the Holy Spirit.

Can we find encouragement, even in the current circumstances of coronavirus and lockdown? Well, I won’t make small of what some people are going through. Some have lost loved ones and are, understandably, grieving. Some have lost security and now there is tension and anxiety. Others are working on the “frontline” and are continually witnessing medical trauma and uncertainty. And more, besides: there are all sorts of circumstances around us.

However, scripture gives us lots of ways to find courage and encouragement – in fact, scripture is full of that, I’m spoilt for choice. Here are a few that I spotted (these are just short quotes, but, if you would like to, grab a bible and read around them):

- **Philippians 4:8** - Finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things. This encourages me to develop healthy thinking: to think on things that are good and Godly, rather than anything destructive. I must consider what I’m allowing myself to be exposed to, e.g. what I watch on screens, what I read, etc.: does it bring me closer to the Lord, or am I indulging in unhealthy things?
- **Hebrews 12:14** - Make every effort to live in peace with everyone and to be holy; without holiness no one will see the Lord. ¹⁵ See to it that no one falls short of the grace of God and that no bitter root grows up to cause trouble and defile many. My actions and attitudes are important, as well. Being holy seems a tall order, but I think holiness is something that the Lord assigns, even though I don’t deserve it. It helps me stay close to the Lord. As a church community, also, it’s important that we have good, sound worship, teaching, etc., rather than anything false.
- **Hebrews 12:24-25** - ²⁴ And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds, ²⁵ not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching. I can give and receive encouragement, with my fellow believers. Also, we mustn’t give up meeting together. That’s quite a challenge in the current circumstances. However, there are ways to meet, for example, online, as the homegroup did on Tuesday evening, using the “Zoom app”. There are other “techie” things, these days, too, e.g. “WhatsApp”, etc. It’s not as good as meeting physically face to face, but in lockdown, it can help. And, of course, a good old telephone call, or letter goes a long way. Even during lockdown, we are

still allowed to exercise, so a smiling face and a wave as I pass a friend's house might make all the difference.

- [John 15:5](#) – “I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing...” This encourages me to stay grafted into the vine (i.e. the Lord), which enables and empowers me. “Apart from me you can do nothing” doesn't sound overly encouraging! However, the converse is, presumably, also true: with him we can do anything that he wishes us to do.

Some years ago, now, my favourite T-shirt of the time had this on the front: “It's better to light one candle than to curse the darkness”. It's a lesson I've had to learn again and again – I'm afraid I'm not always a quick learner!

In [Romans 12:6-8](#), encouragement is there in the list of spiritual gifts. One of the characters that we read about through the book of Acts is Barnabus: his name means “son of encouragement”. [Hebrews 3:13](#) and [1 Thessalonians 5:11](#) both encourage us to encourage one another. So, it seems it's an important issue, which we can all take part in!

Anyway, I'm sure you can find much more, in scripture, to encourage us to remain buoyant. I encourage you to keep going in your Christian faith. I am confident that the Lord will work out his purposes, in all of the current circumstances and bring us through it. Take care and stay safe! God bless and our love.

Steve W.