

Rev. Derek Geldart

Encouragement / 1 Samuel 23:14–18

I wonder how many Christians we meet every week who are silently struggling with discouragement or despair. When we meet someone, we often greet them by asking, “How was your week?” or “How have things been going lately?” Sometimes that simple question opens the door to a serious conversation about trials and struggles they have been experiencing. And when it does, we have an opportunity to respond in a way that builds them up in their faith—to offer them the same comfort we ourselves have received from God ([2 Corinthians 1:3–4](#)). But how often do we receive the familiar answer, “It was good, thanks,” and never really know what those few words may be hiding? People come to church. They shake hands. They sing the hymns. They worship. They may even serve and encourage others. Yet on the inside they can be exhausted and overwhelmed, carrying battle scars from life that are deeply entrenched upon their hearts. Behind the smile, there may be a private dialogue of despair that sounds something like this: I don't know how much longer I can keep doing this. I'm tired of fighting the same battles with no victory in sight. I thought things would be different by now. I know what God has promised. I just can't seem to find the strength to hold onto it right now. Why does everyone else seem to be moving forward while I'm still stuck here? Where is God in all of this? Has He forgotten me?

We see people—but do we really see those who are hurting silently around us? And even when God opens our eyes to someone's pain, sometimes we do nothing because we are afraid that we don't know how to help. We see someone hurting and wonder, “What could I possibly say that would make their situation better?” What if their wounds are so deep that our words seem inadequate? What if their despair is so intense that even the Scriptures they once held tightly

seem difficult for them to grasp? What if entering their pain means walking beneath the dark clouds of their discouragement with them, and that makes us uncomfortable? So when someone says, “I’m good, thanks,” even though something in their face tells us otherwise, it can be easier not to ask another question. We walk away—and sometimes later wonder whether we could have done more. But perhaps we begin with the wrong assumption. God may not be asking us to fix their circumstances. He may simply be asking us to enter their wilderness and help them find strength in Him. Today’s message is about our responsibility before God to come alongside people in their time of need. We often cannot change their circumstances, but we can change how we respond to their pain. And we need to remember that being in the will of God does not mean that we will never become discouraged.

Jeremiah knew discouragement as he suffered for faithfully proclaiming God’s Word. Moses knew what it was to lead a people who repeatedly grumbled and rebelled in the wilderness. Even the apostle Paul knew what it was to become deeply discouraged. When he arrived in Macedonia, he wrote, “We had no rest, but we were harassed at every turn—conflicts on the outside, fears within” ([2 Corinthians 7:5](#)). But listen to what Paul says next: “But God, who comforts the downcast, comforted us by the coming of Titus” ([2 Corinthians 7:6](#)). Don’t miss that. God comforted Paul—but He used Titus to do it. Sometimes God’s answer to a discouraged person’s prayer is another believer who is willing to show up. Centuries earlier, as Isaiah looked ahead to a time when God’s people would face judgment, exile, vulnerability, and an uncertain future, God gave them these words: “So do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with my righteous right hand” ([Isaiah 41:10](#)). Notice that God does not tell His people there is nothing around them to fear. He points them instead to who is with them in the midst of it: “I am with you. I am your God. I will strengthen you. I will help you. I will uphold you.”

And that brings us to David. David found himself in his own wilderness—hunted, weary, uncertain, and waiting for promises God had made years earlier

to be fulfilled. And into that wilderness came a friend named Jonathan. Jonathan could not remove Saul. He could not end David's wilderness. He could not immediately place David on the throne. But Jonathan could do something. He could go to David. He could point him back to God. He could remind him of God's promises. And he could stand beside his friend when David needed someone. So, as we walk through this passage today, I want you to think about someone God has placed in your life—someone you know, or perhaps simply suspect, is walking through a wilderness of their own. And ask yourself one question: Am I willing to be that person's Jonathan?

Encouragement Goes Where Hurting People Are

1 Samuel 23:14–15 NIV

David stayed in the wilderness strongholds and in the hills of the Desert of Ziph. Day after day Saul searched for him, but God did not give David into his hands.

While David was at Horesh in the Desert of Ziph, he learned that Saul had come out to take his life.

When we think about David, we often picture the man after God's own heart, the great king of Israel, secure in his palace with all the privileges that came with the throne. But before David ever lived in the palace, there was a long season when he lived in caves and wilderness strongholds, running for his life. Israel had wanted to be like the surrounding nations and asked for a king ([1 Samuel 8:4–22](#)), and God directed Samuel to anoint Saul as Israel's first king ([1 Samuel 10:1](#)). Saul's reign actually began with tremendous promise. The Spirit of God came powerfully upon him, and he even prophesied with the prophets ([1 Samuel 10:6–10](#)). God gave Saul a great victory over the Ammonites as he successfully led Israel in rescuing Jabesh Gilead ([1 Samuel 11:1–11](#)). But facing

the Philistines, Saul chose to act independently rather than obey God's command, and Samuel told him that his kingdom would not endure and that God had sought out a man after His own heart ([1 Samuel 13:5–14](#)).

And that eventually brings us to David. He was introduced to Samuel as Jesse's youngest son, tending his father's sheep, and God chose him to become Israel's future king. Samuel anointed him, and the Spirit of the LORD came powerfully upon David ([1 Samuel 16:12–13](#)). David entered Saul's court as a musician and soon rose to national prominence after killing Goliath. His military successes continued, and Saul gave him a high rank in the army because David was successful in whatever mission Saul gave him ([1 Samuel 18:5](#)). His fame grew so much that the women sang, “Saul has slain his thousands, and David his tens of thousands” ([1 Samuel 18:7](#)). But the song that celebrated David's success also helped ignite Saul's jealousy. Saul became increasingly threatened by David and repeatedly tried to kill him ([1 Samuel 18:10–11](#); [19:8–10](#)). Eventually David was forced to flee from place to place, and by the time we reach today's passage, the future king of Israel is not living in a palace—he is hiding in the wilderness strongholds of the Desert of Ziph. Scripture tells us, “Day after day Saul searched for him, but God did not give David into his hands” ([1 Samuel 23:14](#)).

Talk about a roller coaster! David had gone from tending sheep, to being anointed king, to defeating Goliath, to becoming a celebrated military leader—and now he was number one on Saul's list of people who must die. God had promised him a throne, but David was living in a wilderness. He had experienced God's power, but now he was being hunted day after day. He knew what God had promised, but the circumstances surrounding him seemed to be moving in the opposite direction. This moment captures a critical point in David's conflict with Saul. David was living under extraordinary physical and emotional pressure as Saul relentlessly pursued him [1]. And it is here that God sends someone to strengthen David. Let me introduce you to Jonathan—the king's own son! Jonathan was already an accomplished military leader ([1 Samuel 13:2–3](#)). Since Jonathan already commanded soldiers and Scripture consistently lists him prominently among Saul's sons, it is reasonable to understand him as Saul's

expected heir [2]. By every human calculation, Jonathan had reason to view David as a rival for the throne [3]. Yet Jonathan loved David and entered into a covenant with him. Shortly after David killed Goliath, Jonathan took off the robe he was wearing and gave it to David, along with his tunic, sword, bow, and belt ([1 Samuel 18:1-4](#)). This extraordinary act demonstrated Jonathan's covenant loyalty and willingness to honor David, even though Jonathan himself belonged to the royal household [4]. Eventually Jonathan understood clearly that God's purpose was for David to become king. In fact, he will tell David plainly, "You will be king over Israel, and I will be second to you" ([1 Samuel 23:17](#)).

But before we consider what Jonathan said to David, notice first what Jonathan did. Scripture tells us, "Saul's son Jonathan went to David at Horesh" ([1 Samuel 23:16](#)). Jonathan went. David did not have to come looking for Jonathan. Jonathan went looking for David. Saul was searching the wilderness for David because he wanted to take his life; Jonathan entered that same wilderness because he wanted to strengthen his friend. Two men from the same family were looking for David. Saul was looking for David to destroy him. Jonathan was looking for David to strengthen him. There is our first lesson about encouragement: encouragement goes where hurting people are. Do not underestimate the ministry of simply being present in someone's valley. Hurting people don't always need us to arrive with answers. Sometimes they need someone willing to sit beside them, listen to them, pray with them, and remind them by our very presence that they are not walking through this alone. Scripture tells us to "encourage one another and build each other up" ([1 Thessalonians 5:11](#)). We are told to "encourage one another daily" ([Hebrews 3:13](#)), to "bear with the failings of the weak" ([Romans 15:1](#)), and to "carry each other's burdens" ([Galatians 6:2](#)).

Sometimes we hesitate because we don't know what to say. We think, "I can't change what they're going through. I can't fix their marriage. I can't take away their grief. I can't change the diagnosis. I can't solve their family problems. What could I possibly do?" You can go. You can listen. You can sit beside them. You can pray. You can make the phone call. You can ask the second question when "I'm

doing fine” doesn't sound convincing. You can carry a little of the weight with them. Jonathan could not remove Saul from the throne. He could not end David's wilderness. He could not make God's promise come true that afternoon. But he could make certain of one thing: David would not have to stand in that wilderness alone. And Jonathan did more than simply arrive. He would help David find strength in God and remind him that Yahweh's promise concerning his future would not be thwarted, even by someone as powerful as Saul [5]. We will look more closely at that in a moment, but first we should not miss the importance of Jonathan's presence. Sometimes we ask God to encourage someone when God may be asking us to go and encourage them. Sometimes we pray, “Lord, help them,” without considering that perhaps part of God's answer to that prayer is us. David was in the wilderness. Jonathan could have remained safely at home. But Jonathan went. And perhaps there is someone in your life right now who doesn't need you to fix their wilderness. They simply need to know that you are willing to enter it with them.

Encouragement Points People Back to God

1 Samuel 23:16 NIV

And Saul's son Jonathan went to David at Horesh and helped him find strength in God.

We have already seen that encouragement begins by going where hurting people are. We listen, seek to understand, and are willing to enter their pain [6]. But biblical encouragement does not end with our presence. Notice carefully what Jonathan did next. Scripture does not say that Jonathan gave David strength. It says that Jonathan “helped him find strength in God” ([1 Samuel 23:16](#)). Jonathan was not the source of David's strength; God was. That is what makes biblical encouragement different from simply trying to make someone feel better. We can say, “Cheer up,” “Things will get better,” or “I believe in you.” But there are wildernesses in life where those words simply cannot carry the

weight. Our own strength can fail. Circumstances can get worse. Even people we depend upon can disappoint us. But God does not change. Sometimes the greatest encouragement we can give someone is not merely, “I believe in you,” but “God is faithful, and He has not abandoned you.”

I wonder whether David, hiding in the wilderness, ever felt something like the sons of Korah described in [Psalm 42](#). The psalmist asks, “Why, my soul, are you downcast? Why so disturbed within me?” But then he speaks truth to his own discouraged heart: “Put your hope in God” ([Psalm 42:5](#)). His circumstances had not necessarily changed. What changed was where he looked for strength. And David had every reason to know where that strength could be found. This was the same David who had faced a lion and a bear while protecting his father’s sheep ([1 Samuel 17:34–37](#)). This was the same David who had stood before Goliath and declared, “the battle is the LORD’s” ([1 Samuel 17:47](#)). But sometimes even people who have experienced God’s faithfulness in the past need someone to help them remember where their strength comes from in the present.

The God of the Valley of Elah was still the God of the wilderness of Ziph. David’s circumstances had changed, but God had not. Saul may have occupied the throne, but Saul did not control David’s future. God’s sovereignty becomes an anchor when discouragement clouds our perspective [7]. Jonathan did not make David dependent upon Jonathan. He helped David become conscious again of his dependence upon God. And apparently David learned that lesson well. Years later, David returned to Ziklag to discover the city burned and the families taken captive. His own men even talked about stoning him. Scripture says, “David was greatly distressed.” But then we read, “But David found strength in the LORD his God” ([1 Samuel 30:6](#)). Do you see the progression? Here in [1 Samuel 23:16](#), Jonathan helped David find strength in God. Later, in [1 Samuel 30:6](#), David knew where to go for himself. That is what we want to do when we encourage someone. We cannot become their strength, but we can point them toward the One who is. When they feel weak, we can remind them that Christ said, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness” ([2 Corinthians 12:9](#)). When they are afraid, God says, “I will

strengthen you and help you” ([Isaiah 41:10](#)). A good Jonathan does not say, “You need me.” A good Jonathan says, “You need God—and I will stand beside you while you find your strength in Him.”

Encouragement Reminds People of What God has Said

1 Samuel 23:17 NIV

“Don’t be afraid,” he said. “My father Saul will not lay a hand on you. You will be king over Israel, and I will be second to you. Even my father Saul knows this.”

Jonathan had pointed David back to God, but now notice what he does next. He reminds David of what God had already said. “Don’t be afraid... You will be king over Israel” ([1 Samuel 23:17](#)). Jonathan was not giving David some new revelation or promise. Years earlier, Samuel had taken the horn of oil and anointed David in the presence of his brothers, and “from that day on the Spirit of the LORD came powerfully upon David” ([1 Samuel 16:13](#)). David already knew what God had said about his future. He already knew that God had chosen him. He already knew there was a throne somewhere beyond this wilderness. He simply needed someone to remind him of what he already knew. Isn’t that often true of us? When we are discouraged, we don’t necessarily need someone to tell us something we have never heard before. Sometimes we need someone to remind us of truths we have known for years. Suffering has a way of narrowing our vision until all we can see is what is happening right now. David could see Saul. He could see the wilderness. He could see another day of running for his life. Jonathan helped him look beyond what he could see to what God had said.

That is one reason God’s Word is so important when we encourage one another. Scripture replaces the voices of discouragement with truth rooted in the character and promises of God [8]. Discouragement tells us nothing will ever change. Fear tells us we are alone. Despair tells us there is no reason to keep going [11]. And when those thoughts begin to dominate our hearts,

discouragement can spiral into deeper despair [9]. But God's Word gives us something stronger than our feelings because its truth does not change when our circumstances do [10]. That doesn't mean throwing Bible verses at hurting people as though quoting a verse somehow makes their pain disappear. It means lovingly helping them remember what remains true in the middle of their pain. When they feel abandoned, we can remind them that God has said, “Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you” ([Hebrews 13:5](#)) [11]. When they cannot understand what God is doing, we can remind them that God works “for the good of those who love Him” ([Romans 8:28](#)) [5]. And when they wonder whether their suffering has somehow separated them from God's love, we can remind them that nothing “will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord” ([Romans 8:38–39](#)). These are not positive thoughts we invent to make ourselves feel better. They are truths grounded in the character of the God who spoke them [12]. The circumstances may change. Our emotions may rise and fall. But the Word of our God “endures forever” ([Isaiah 40:8](#)).

But there is something else beautiful about Jonathan's words that we should not miss. Listen again: “You will be king over Israel, and I will be second to you” ([1 Samuel 23:17](#)). Humanly speaking, David's future throne was Jonathan's throne. Jonathan could have viewed David as his greatest rival, yet instead he was encouraging David toward the very future that would cost Jonathan the crown. Jonathan wasn't saying, “David, I hope God's plan works out—as long as it doesn't cost me anything.” His words essentially said, “I want God's purpose for your life even when it costs me the crown.” That is true encouragement. It isn't threatened when God blesses someone else. It doesn't need to stand in the spotlight. It doesn't secretly hope that someone else fails so that we can succeed. True encouragement rejoices when God's gracious purposes are accomplished in another person's life. Sometimes the discouraged Christian does not need a new truth. They need a Jonathan who loves them enough to remind them of an old truth. David's circumstances were shouting, “Saul is going to win.” Jonathan reminded him, “God has already spoken.” And sometimes that is exactly what we need to do for one another. When the

wilderness becomes so large that someone can no longer see beyond it, we lovingly remind them of what God has said. God has spoken. God is faithful. And the wilderness does not get the final word.

Encouragement Stands with People Even When the Wilderness Remains

1 Samuel 23:18 NIV

The two of them made a covenant before the LORD. Then Jonathan went home, but David remained at Horesh.

The story ends, at least for now, not with some great deliverance, but with David still in the wilderness. Don't miss those final words: "David remained at Horesh." Jonathan had come. He had helped David find strength in God. He had reminded David of what God had said. They had renewed their covenant together before the LORD. And then Jonathan went home—but David remained. Saul was still king. Saul was still seeking David's life. David still had no throne, and the promise God had made years earlier had still not been fulfilled. Jonathan did not change David's circumstances. He helped David find the strength to face circumstances that had not changed. And sometimes that is exactly what biblical encouragement looks like.

When we come alongside someone who is hurting, listen to them, point them back to God, and remind them of His promises, it doesn't necessarily mean that tomorrow God will open the door, remove the burden, heal the disease, restore the relationship, or provide an immediate escape from the wilderness. Sometimes the wilderness remains. And when it does, our calling is not to offer easy answers or pretend that the pain isn't real. We come alongside them, pray with them and for them, and help them look again to the God who promises that "those who hope in the LORD will renew their strength" ([Isaiah 40:31](#)). We remind them that when the burden remains, Christ still says, "My grace is

sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness” ([2 Corinthians 12:9](#)). We don't come with a self-righteous confidence in our own wisdom. We come humbly, remembering that the God who has comforted us in our troubles calls us to share that same comfort with others ([2 Corinthians 1:3-4](#)).

And sometimes we need to remind one another that the wilderness is real, but it isn't forever. Paul knew suffering that did not immediately disappear, yet he could write, “For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all” ([2 Corinthians 4:17](#)). Paul wasn't saying suffering doesn't hurt. He was saying that when our present suffering is placed beside the eternal glory God has prepared for His people, suffering does not get the final word. David remained at Horesh—but Horesh wasn't the end of David's story. There was still a throne beyond the wilderness. And perhaps there is someone in your life right now who is still at Horesh. Someone who is tired. Someone who is discouraged. Someone who knows what God's Word says but is struggling to hold onto it. You may not be able to remove their wilderness. You may not have an answer for every question. But you can go. You can listen. You can point them to God. You can remind them of what He has said. And you can stand beside them while the wilderness remains.

So I want to finish where we began. Think again about that person God may have brought to your mind at the beginning of this message. Perhaps God's answer to their prayer for encouragement will be another believer willing to enter their wilderness and help them find strength in Him.

Will you be that person?

Are you willing to be someone's Jonathan?

Footnotes

- [1] Richard D. Phillips, *1 Samuel*, ed. Philip Graham Ryken and Richard D. Phillips, Duguid Iain M., Reformed Expository Commentary (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2012), 398–399.
- [2] Diana V. Edelman, “Jonathan Son of Saul,” in *The Anchor Yale Bible Dictionary*, ed. David Noel Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 3:945–946.
- [3] Harry A. Hoffner Jr., *1 & 2 Samuel*, Evangelical Exegetical Commentary (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2015), 1:431–432.
- [4] Kenneth Boa, Sid Buzzell, and Bill Perkins, *Handbook to Leadership: Leadership in the Image of God* (Atlanta, GA: Trinity House Publishers, Inc., 2007), 717.
- [5] John, *Keys to Passing Your Spiritual Test: Unlocking the Secrets to Your Spiritual Promotion* (Shippensburg, PA: Destiny Image, 2012). [See here.]
- [6] Robert D. Jones, Kristin L. Kellen, and Rob Green, *The Gospel for Disordered Lives: An Introduction to Christ-Centered Biblical Counseling* (Nashville, TN: B&H Academic, 2021), 303–306.
- [7] Jay E. Adams, “Encouragement,” in *The Practical Encyclopedia of Christian Counseling* (Cordova, TN: Institute for Nouthetic Studies, 2020), 64.
- [8] Scott Farhart and Elizabeth King, *The Christian Woman’s Complete Guide to Health: Everything You Need to Know About You! Adolescence to Menopause and Everything in Between* (Lake Mary, FL: Siloam, 2012).
- [9] Joyce Meyer, *Mornings with God: 365 Devotions to Start Your Day Right* (New York, NY: FaithWords, 2024), 361.
- [10] Jay E. Adams, *I Timothy, II Timothy, and Titus*, The Christian Counselor’s Commentary (Cordova, TN: Institute for Nouthetic Studies, 2020), 98–99.
- [11] Jay E. Adams, “Encouragement,” in *The Practical Encyclopedia of Christian Counseling* (Cordova, TN: Institute for Nouthetic Studies, 2020), 64.

[12] Kenneth Boa, *Handbook to Renewal: Renewing Your Mind with Affirmations from Scripture* (Atlanta, GA: Trinity House Publishers, 1993).