

Encouraging Words

...Let us encourage one another... Hebrews 10:25

Encouraging Words 2023 Volume 3 Issue 4

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FROM PASTOR CHUCK

Thanks, men, for the numerous articles that you submitted for this edition - from both North and South Carolina! (Ladies, we'd sure like for you to contribute!) Earlier, I had asked a few Brothers to send me some of their thoughts on "Life's 3 Biggest Questions" - "Who Am I?" (on our Identity); "Where Do I Belong?" (on our Community); and "What Am I Here For?" (on our Purpose). In the second section of this issue, we've included several of these comments/articles related to our identity in Christ. Good stuff! If you would like to submit your thoughts on Questions 2 & 3 for the next issue, please do! And, since our next issue will go out in the Holiday season, please share with us some of your reflections about Thanksgiving and the birth of Jesus.

Last month I was personally blessed to serve with Kairos 52 at Central Prison. Prior to the retreat, I asked several men who had participated in previous Kairos retreats to send me some words of encouragement to share with the new group. They did and they crushed it! Their words were so inspiring and connected so well with the new group. I've included one of these letters in this edition. And, I certainly encourage you to sign up for a Kairos Retreat if one is offered at your facility.

Remember to check out previous issues of Encouraging Words Newsletter on your tablets. Also, in the coming months, we will invite you to check out our "Encouraging Words" podcast.

H E S A I D I T

BROTHER JOHN, "A couple of great one liners I use regarding my faith is "never look down on a man unless you're looking down to pick him up." Jesus did this when He descended from heaven to pick me up. Charles Spurgeon said "Every Christian is either a missionary or an imposter". I think it's important that we daily evaluate ourselves pertaining to serving God."

BROTHER JEFFERY, "Forgiveness is the key that unlocks the door of resentment and takes off the handcuffs of hatred. It is a power that breaks the chains of bitterness! It releases the shackles of selfishness. Forgiveness can make beautiful people from people who have known defeat, known suffering, known struggle, known loss! But they have found a way, in Jesus, to forgive their enemies! Beautiful people do not just happen, they are shaped and formed through life's many struggles! I hope and pray this will help someone who has been bound by unforgiveness. Thank you Jesus!"

DISCIPLESHIP TIP

In one of the Bible study groups at Central Prison, the men are role-playing to sharpen their witnessing skills. One Brother will be the follower of Jesus and engage in a faith sharing conversation with another man who plays the role of an unbeliever. Then the group discusses it. Pretty cool stuff! Way to go Brothers!

I've Got Good News and I've Got Bad News

How do we usually respond to that?" Uhhh...give me the bad news first!" Well, regarding any other issue, that's typical. But regarding Jesus' commission for us to "...go into all the world and preach the gospel {good news} to all creation, (Mark 16:15)." I'd have to ask "Do they really want to hear the bad news?"

My brothers, the unbeliever cannot fully appreciate/respond to the good news without first hearing the bad news! Paul pulled no punches when he said that "...God's wrath is revealed from heaven against all godlessness and unrighteousness of people who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth" (Romans 1:18). Basically he says that God is about to "cut up!" on everybody who's lived a life of sin and has yet to acknowledge that sin before Him, and turn from it.

The beautiful thing is the good news is not far from us. I asked a brother (Fitz) why do we want the bad news before the good? He said "Cause people want to feel relief after the bad news, when we hear the good!" I can agree with that! Paul blessed us with the good news first though, in verse 16 of Romans 1, "For I am not ashamed of the gospel {good news} because it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes..." Fellas, just as we'd be responsible for lives lost if we knew/saw danger coming and kept quiet about it, we ARE responsible when people don't know the good news, cause we're quiet about the bad news! Share the good... and the bad!

Brother Troy

Hear the Voice of Jesus

The people in Matt 7:21-23 and Matt. 25:31-46 are being judged - they profess to be Christian (believers). It is our walk, not our talk, that reveals to Jesus and others who we are, and who we follow - Jesus or the world. In John 14:6 Jesus says, "I am the way, the truth, and life. No man cometh unto the Father, but by me." Thus, our heart must be set upon Jesus and the way He says to go. We (as believers), must go! We can only do this by the renewing of our minds. (Romans 12:2) "And be not conformed to this world, but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind, that ye may prove what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect will of God."

Therefore, I believe in the whole Bible, not a Bible full of holes. I don't pick and choose what I will accept. I accept the Bible, and pray to God to give me the understanding of what I don't understand. Hence, I don't run behind any man or seek his ways, but I seek God in Christ Jesus and His ways according to the Holy Spirit which God has given me.

Too often, in here, I see guys who claim to be Christians, but their walks show they are anything but. They follow behind the things and people of the world. Many of these pretending Christians actually think they are fooling people, while their lives are telling the truth of who they are and who they truly belong to. One day, we all, at one time or another, will stand or kneel before Jesus, for His righteous Judgment! What will HIS words be to you? "Well done, good and faithful servant." Or "Depart from me for I never knew you"? You really can know.

Brother Melvin

Unchained

Whatever you are chained to
Jesus has come to set you free
Whatever piece of the past you hold tight to
There is a Savior who paid the debt to let you go
Whatever you are used to being defined by
The Son of God has come to set the record straight
What are you chained to?
Are you chained to who you used to be?
The things you did, the habits you had?
Things you have no desire to admit?
Do you dwell in a prison of secrets? Of shame?
The things people once did to you?
Memories of those who once misused their power
And said or did terrible things to you
Things that broke your heart
But they placed all the blame on you?
Do you live in a prison of abuse? Of self-hate?
Chained to others' expectations of you?
Do you dwell in a prison of never feeling worthy,
Not good enough, no matter what you do?
Are you chained to a religion? A man-made
List of do's and don'ts you are told to live by?
What are you chained to?

Jesus is not a policeman. He is your friend
He came, died, arose to unchain us all
So let your chains fall to the ground and let the
Metal echo around the world - you are free!

Brother Gary

KAIROS ANYONE?

Four day Kairos (God's special time) Retreats have been blessing incarcerated men and women for decades. If you haven't participated in one yet, I encourage you to do so the next time one is offered in your facility. Below is a letter that Brother Christopher wrote to inspire the participants at the Kairos Retreat at Central Prison in Raleigh last month.

Dear Kairos 52 Brothers,

Just know you are not doing time alone – God is with you every step of the way. All that is required of you is to call on the name of Jesus - His Spirit will meet you right where you are at. He desires to heal you from your past traumas and give you a new Spirit that will “empower” you to walk in love, forgiveness, grace and mercy. He will give you courage to face any giants in your life and reward you for your faithfulness like He did Job in the Bible.

When both of my kids were murdered behind gun violence, I became depressed and had all these mixed emotions going through my head. God surrounded me with Kairos graduates and Christian Brothers to help me get through the grief. Guys I never met came to know the Lord because they saw God at work in my situation. “What the enemy meant for Bad, God will use for Good.”

Your story may be dark and ugly, but God specializes in turning things around. He uses people like you and me to spread the Gospel that His “redemptive love” is free. You may feel like you have no purpose in prison – this is far from the truth. You can still be a father to your children, a mentor to others going down the wrong path or get a Bible study started in the block. Nothing is wasted in God's time. He can take your little faith and move mountains. You just need to believe He can.

I hope your time with the Kairos volunteers will open up your eyes to the many possibilities God will do through your life. Don't just let this Kairos experience be an event – let it be a life changing moment that will take you to new heights and depths.

As I close, I challenge each one of you men to not just do time but to “redeem the time,” doing positive work going forward. Your family and children need you to become the Best Version of yourself.

I leave you with this one scripture, “Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation, old things have passed away and behold all things have become new.” 2 Corinthians 5:17. From this day forward you can be that new person that makes a difference in your community. Keep the faith and keep trusting God.

Brother Christopher G.

Kairos 17 - Central Prison

Author of “Tears We Can't Ignore” and 4 other books

Being a Missionary in Prison

When I was sentenced to life without parole 19 years ago, I felt like my life was over. I felt like I was just waiting to die, like my life would not, could not, have any purpose. Words to my mother from Pastor John Gimenez, a former drug addict who planted Rock Church in Virginia Beach and founded a worldwide ministry, offered a contrasting perspective: “Your sons are not prisoners. They are missionaries in a prison.” Living and thinking of myself as a missionary in a prison, instead of a prisoner, has transformed my life.

Many consider the sentence of life without parole to mean a life without purpose. Living with Kingdom purpose has enabled me to impact numerous others during this journey. In a character reference letter, my nephew wrote, “If Timothy was released today, he would be more likely to start his own church than to return to prison as an inmate.” Only four years old at the time of my arrest, this nephew knows me as a person whose life is defined by Great Commission purpose. Regardless of whether I ever get out of prison, my life is filled with purpose.

Pastor John Gimenez's affirmation has encouraged me to live and think of myself as a missionary in a prison instead of a prisoner. This statement has motivated and challenged me to submit my life to God for Him to use to impact others. By living with Kingdom purpose, my life can serve to demonstrate the transformative power of Jesus Christ even while I serve life without parole. As an ambassador of Christ and a minister of reconciliation, my every action and thought must aim to bring honor to Christ and deliver the gospel to my neighbors within these gray prison walls.

Brother Timothy J.

Happiness is a Choice - Brother Josh J.

If prison has taught me anything it is that God's grace is sufficient and that we truly are more than conquerors in Christ. Nothing could defeat Christ, and I know nothing can defeat me either. There are many people who believe they cannot be happy because they are in prison. This is disheartening to say the least because these people have resigned the authority of their lives to something outside of their control – their circumstances. In doing so they've rendered themselves helpless and hopeless, becoming victims instead of victors. What's even worse is that what they believe to be true is in fact not true at all. In reality, happiness has little or nothing to do with circumstance. It depends primarily upon one's mental perspective or attitude.

Dale Carnegie made a profound statement concerning happiness in his book entitled "How to Win Friends and Influence People:" In the book he says, "Everybody in the world is seeking happiness and there is one sure way to find it. That is by controlling your thoughts. Happiness doesn't depend on outward conditions. It depends on inner conditions. It isn't what you have, or who you are, or what you are doing that makes you happy or unhappy. It is what you think about". As proof he gives the example that two people can go through roughly the same circumstances, and yet one person can be miserable and the other happy. The reason for this is because they possess two different mental attitudes.

Our attitude is the single most important thing that decides our level of happiness, not our circumstances. This is great news, too, because our thoughts, i.e., our attitude, is the one thing which we have complete control over. Realizing and embracing this truth restores our authority over our lives and affords us the freedom to choose happiness.

Stoic philosopher Epictetus said, "It's not the accident (the circumstance) that distresses a person, because it doesn't distress another person; it is the judgment which he makes about it." If you judge prison to be a bad thing and tell yourself that nothing good could ever come from it, then that's exactly what prison will be for you. However, if you can begin to see prison from a positive perspective; to see it as an opportunity to develop your character and inner fortitude, then that's what prison will be for you. Like Proverbs 23:7 says, "For as a man thinks within himself, so he is."

You do not need to wait until your circumstances change to be happy and content. You can choose to be happy and content right now, even in prison. Stop focusing on what you cannot control and begin to focus within on what you can. Christ changes men, who then change their environments. If you want your environment to change you must begin by changing yourself.

A Poem of Reflection - Brother John P.

Stretched out on my cot
I stare at the gray wall.
Outside, a summer evening
That does not know me
Goes singing into the countryside.

Night and silence.
I listen.
Only steps and cries of the guards,
I hear my own soul tremble and heave.
Nothing else?

I hear, I hear
The silent night thoughts
Of my fellow sufferers asleep or
awake,
As if voices, cries
As if shouts for planks to save them.
I hear the uneasy creak of the beds

I hear how sleepless men toss and
turn,

Who long for freedom and deeds of
wrath,
When at gray dawn's sleep finds them
They murmur in dreams of their wives
and children.

I hear the happy lisp of half-grown
boys.,
Delighting in childhood dreams;
I hear them tug at their blankets...
and hide from hideous nightmares.

I hear the sighs and weak breath of the
old,
Who in silence prepare for the last
journey.
They have seen justice and injustice
come and go;
Now they wish to see the
imperishable, the eternal.

The choir is silent,

But my ear is open wide
We the old, the young,
The sons of all tongues,
We the strong, the weak
The sleepers, the wakeful,
We the poor, the rich,
Alike in misfortune.

The good, the bad
Whatever we have been
We men of many scars
We the witnesses of those who died,
We the defiant, we the despondent
The innocent and the much accused
Deeply tormented by long isolation
Brother we are searching, we are
calling
Father we are praying
Can you hear? Can you hear?

*"Hear my cry O God and Listen to my
prayer" - Psalm 61:1*

A Bit of My Testimony

In this day and age do you believe conversations like Paul still happen? Can someone literally go from persecuting and destroying to walking in love in the blink of an eye? I am a living testimony that it does. I went from worldly living and religion to serving and reaching people faster than the speed of light. I went from a street thug to a Christian (anointed man of God). How did this all come about? David acknowledges, "When my father and mother forsake me, then the Lord will take care of me". (Ps. 27:11); and this is usually the case for many. However, we do not usually see Him and His works, and we end up in a situation like I am now, in prison.

I was abused, neglected, abandoned, rejected amongst a host of other adversities that led me to search, get caught up with the wrong people, and do all the wrong things. What was I searching for? Love, acceptance and purpose, along with a list of other familiar actions and characteristics that a child looks for in their parents and family.

I was born in July, 1989. I was actually created through a one-night stand, so that means two different households of rules, traditions, culture and influence. I went through a lot of abuse (verbal and physical) and control with my Father, and just plain ole neglect from my mother. They both shared in rejecting me in so many ways. So I found what I was looking for in the streets. I was a drug dealer, a robber, a gang member, and eventually an inmate. In the midst of all of this, the Lord kept trying to reach me through my grandmother, who is a very big part of who I am today. "The prayer of a righteous man/woman is powerful and effective" (James 5:16). He also promises throughout the whole Bible that "He will never leave us nor forsake us", and He definitely did not in my case.

I did not grasp Christ first though; I followed Mohammed and Allah. On August 4, 2010 I was sentenced to life in prison for murder. While in prison I was still searching and got caught up in everything wrong. I eventually began to die to it all. I had previously survived two bad car accidents (of which one I died three times), I survived a gang war where a gun was put to my head and the trigger pulled (the gun jammed), I survived two suicide attempts (of which one I basically died to the world for three days), I survived two heart attacks, I survived abuse and other atrocities, and now I am surviving prison; the majority, before the age of 30. Why? So I can be the man of God He called me to be.

Life with my parents taught me how to be independent. The streets taught me how to be loyal and dedicated. Islam taught me how to be disciplined. Everything I needed to be who I am today - a Kingdom disciple. On October 29, 2021 I surrendered my life to Christ and since then, like Paul, God has been using me to season the earth and be a light to this dark world - especially prison. (Matt. 5:13-16) I am now justified by faith and have peace with God through my Lord and Savior Jesus Christ (Rom 5:1). I am now a man who looks not to be served but to serve, and it brings me great joy to do it. If you are reading this and you are struggling, know this conversion and great works can happen with you, too. "For now we know that the Lord is the Spirit, and wherever the Spirit of the Lord is there is freedom". (2 Cor. 3:17). Be free my brothers and sisters.

Brother Darrell

Who Am I?

I am a believer and a servant to God and my fellow man. I seek to glorify God in my words and my actions as a Christian by witnessing to others and studying God's word. My life is a new life, free from all of the old labels and washed clean by the blood of Jesus Christ, my Savior. I seek to be more like Christ each day and show love to others so that they may also find salvation in Christ. I wear the armor of God and endure against evil for the sake of all who seek the will of the Lord. I am a disciple for the Lord and to anyone who wants to know God.

Brother Robert

Who Am I?

"I am a child of God saved by grace."

Brother Walt

*May the God of hope fill you
with all joy and peace
as you trust in him, so that you
may overflow with hope by the
power of the Holy Spirit.
ROMANS 15:13*

Rubber Meet Road

There's a big difference between living and being alive. My first 7 years in prison I lived in bondage, both physically and spiritually. After I re-dedicated my life to Christ, I experienced the freedom and peace that surpasses understanding Paul describes, despite prison and addiction. After 10 years of incarceration God finally allowed me to be set free physically, but He freed me spiritually when I surrendered my life to Jesus.

I was released on Saturday July 8, 2023 from Warren CI - the next day I was in church praising the Lord for setting me free. Finding a church home, and building a network of Godly men is a priority for the man of God who wants to STAY free. Filling my days and hours achieving my goals is mandatory, but my priority must be maintaining my relationship with Jesus and the body of Christ. If I want the best this life has to offer, my goals need to line up with His will, and the Word of God.

The joy and peace I'm experiencing now is indescribable... This is the fruit of the Spirit living in me and the result of obedience to God. I'm living with this joy not simply because I just got out of prison, but because I'm following hard after Christ. I made a commitment to go to Bible study and Sunday service at my local, gospel preaching church. I'm actively seeking and connecting with mature Christian

brothers to build a Godly network of men that can help me in my walk.

My family is amazed at the changes that have occurred in me. The change in my priorities and values is a living testimony of the power of God, and living my faith is impacting them in ways I can't imagine.

Carrying a cross is a sacrifice many aren't willing to make, but the death of my self-will and submission to the Holy Spirit allows God to transform my life. We have a Father who loves us more than we can comprehend, His plans for us are more than just good - they're best. As much as I'm loving and enjoying my physical freedom, I have come to place a much higher value on my spiritual freedom.

Without a doubt I know I can trust the Lord with my life. I have faith that if I continue to chase Him the way I chased carnal pleasure, I will step into a life beyond my wildest imaginations. This life is available to all God's children, regardless of our PO Box, it only takes the willingness to do the work. Submit to Him today, and reap the harvest of a life filled with purpose, fulfillment, and peace for your future.

Brother James E.

Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

PHILIPPIANS 4:6-7

WHO AM I? MY IDENTITY IN CHRIST

Who Am I?

The Bible says a lot about this...perhaps to change our perspective from the worldly view of ourselves to God's view of us. As believers, we are His children (1 John 3:1, John 1:12), so He loves us as a father would love his children. As His children, we are heirs along with Christ (Rom. 8:17/Gal.4:7). We're also called saints and so I am - though through no actions of my own, nor am I deserving of such a title on my own, but I have been given Christ's righteousness and because of that alone, I am a saint. Without Christ's righteousness, I am a sinner, condemned to death..." Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?" (Rom 7:24 ESV) Thanks be to God that I have been delivered. I am now a citizen of heaven, (Eph 2:19/Phil 3:20) a people for His own possession, a holy nation. (1 Peter 2:9) We are to be the light of the world and the salt of the earth (Matt 5:13-14) to do His work and will to make the world better until His return. We are also called slaves of God and righteousness. (Rom 6:22, 18) Our life is no longer our own, but His. One cannot be a slave to two masters...so we choose to serve God rather than be slaves to sin.

Brother Eric

My Life Creed - Brother Josh

The purpose of my life is to glorify God. It is my mission and nothing and no one will keep me from accomplishing it. God has chosen me to emulate Christ to the world. I humbly accept this responsibility and consider it a great honor and a privilege. I take my commitment seriously and vow to live worthy of such a call. I am a soldier – a warrior for Christ – and I fight with tenacity. I am not called to fit in with others. I am called to be different. My ability to control my emotions and actions regardless of circumstances sets me apart from other men. I am called to be a leader, not a follower, and I always lead by example. If no one follows, I can walk alone. In Christ, I am an army of one. I am a weapon – forged by the fire of adversity – carefully crafted by the hand of my Master. I abhor mediocrity. Uncompromising integrity is my standard. My character and commitment never waver. My word is my bond. I will never quit. I persevere and thrive on adversity. IF knocked down I will get back up every time. I am never out of the fight. I will not fail because I cannot fail. I always practice strict self-discipline and self-denial. Like my Savior I am bold like a lion. I will exhibit courage by running toward what others run away from. I am not ordinary. I am fearless - undaunted by pain or danger and nothing can defeat me. I cannot be moved. I am a champion and victory is mine.

Identity Crisis - Brother Bruce

Peace and Blessings to you my dear brethren through our gracious Lord Jesus the Christ. God our Father has called us out of darkness (I Peter 2:9) and into His marvelous light so that we might “show forth” or put on display His praises, right?” Why then do we continue to behave as if the former life styles and patterns (strongholds) of darkness still have power over us? Don't we know what we've been called into? Come, and Listen. Explore this with me.

If someone asked you, “Who are you?” What would you say? “Well, Uh, I'm an Afro-American male.” “I'm a 30-year-old businessman” “I'm an artist.” “A father, a husband, a brother, a firefighter, a marine, a mechanic, a caregiver, a friend, an addict, an ex-con, a lost soul.” All of these potential answers are incomplete, believe it or not. The list could go on and on so often because our answers only reveal our ethnicity (race), our hobbies and interests, or our obligation to a job or career, etc. You may even have been branded like me by this society that so flippantly rejects prisoners.

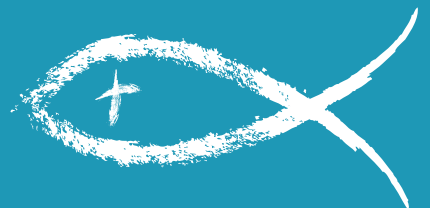
It is crucial to your Christian development that you understand this: from age to age, mankind has tried to validate himself (myself especially included) based on what or who we have, how “successful” or accomplished we may be, what we look like, or what we're able to do through our many strengths, gifts, talents, resources and intellect. That is not how it works, fellas! No sir. Genesis 1:26 tells us that we, mankind, were created in the image of God

Just like a General Motors owner's manual will tell you whether you're pushing a Tahoe or a Denali, so we must get our identity from our Maker/Creator!! My Bible tells me that we've been chosen by God as His own, and we must represent Him to others. Remember guys, that our ultimate value comes from being children of the King! You'll find tons of scripture in Ephesians 1 and 2 alone that confirm our identity in Christ. Sincerely ask God to reveal to you just who you are in Him and for the wisdom and courage to walk in your new ID (2 Cor. 5:17)

Identity and God Working In You

As I constantly hear of things not of God in many church gathering places and hear professions of scripture, but not showing (living it), I am brought to this: We have not yet thoroughly believed what we say we believe in! We believe in the finished work of Christ, yet many times are just as miserable about self as any person could be. If there is anything in this world that would cause us to give up Christianity, it is self. Do you understand what I mean? Oh, how we are discouraged by what we find in ourselves! So, we don't believe what we believe in. We believe in the finished work of Christ, and that God puts all that finished work to our account. God does not see us in ourselves, He sees us in Christ. He does not see us; He sees Christ in us. We don't believe that! For if we really did, we would be delivered from ourselves and would indeed be triumphant Christians! We Christians must believe our beliefs! May God open our eyes, enlighten us with revelation of Himself that we may increase our faith to know that it is God in us that is the Power of all things. All praise to Jesus Christ!

Brother Tony



PRISON ALLIANCE offers free Correspondence Bible Study lessons to anyone who is seeking to grow in their faith. Every completed lesson is sent to a volunteer who provides encouraging feedback to the student.

After completion of the first section – just 25 days of Bible Study – Prison Alliance provides a certificate of completion and a new Life Recovery Bible.

Enroll by writing:

PRISON ALLIANCE
PO BOX 97095
Raleigh, NC, 27624.



MORE GOOD STUFF ON YOUR TABLETS

Brothers, have you checked out the inspirational items available on the tablet? Go to Education – Edovo-Spiritual-Inspirational.

Search Andy Stanley – These video messages are awesome!

- >> Try “Free,” a series about our position in Christ and victory over sin.
- >> Or “Guardrails,” to learn about establishing protection to prevent calamity
- >> With “Bible for Grownups,” you can see what a beautiful, wonderful, miraculous gift we have in God’s Word.
- >> Check out “In the Meantime” to see what we can do in the valleys
- >> Or find out “How to not Be Your Own Worst Enemy”

These messages have really affected my life and walk with the Lord Jesus... I promise that you will not be disappointed if you take seriously this opportunity for growth in your faith.

Brother Steve

BE A CONTRIBUTOR

This newsletter is created for and written by incarcerated Brothers & Sisters. If you have an encouraging story, a teaching, a charge, a poem or drawing that you think would encourage others, send it to us!

In future issues we’ll be touching on topics like: “Salvation,” Identity in Christ,” “the Church,” “Purpose,” “Depression and more. Do your best to limit your articles to 3 paragraphs or less. All articles will be subject to light editing for grammar, sentence structure, & clarity. We will identify you by your first name unless you tell us not to use it.

MAIL TO:

The Point Church, Encouraging Words Editor
1503 Walnut St., Cary, NC 27511

