

# ENCOURAGEMENT

**W**hen I was in high school, I had a football coach who met every player at the sideline as he came off the field, shook his hand and said, "Good job!"

I remember very little else about him—but I remember that. No matter how badly I had played, he shook my hand when I came off the field.

Under his coaching, we went undefeated for two years. An incredible feat for a tiny Florida school with a graduating class of 58.

One New Year's Day, after our second undefeated season, he took the entire team—all 33 of us—to the Orange Bowl in Miami. His alma mater, the University of Tennessee, was playing, and he had gotten us tickets. He piled us into a bus and drove 130 miles down the coast, coming back the same night. It was his way of thanking us for a great season.

The next summer we heard he had been fired.

There might have been other reasons, but the one we were given was that the Quarterback Club—a group of businessmen who met on Monday mornings in the local drugstore to discuss Friday night games—said the coach had lied on his application. He was not a graduate of the University of Tennessee. He had gone to a much smaller school. Some said he had never even played college ball. They said he was just a super-promoter who had fooled a bunch of folks.

We kids didn't even get to tell him goodbye. When we reported for practice two weeks before school began, there was a new coach on the field.

"He was a fake," we were told. "We don't need someone like that in our town."

We didn't know about that. All we knew was that he won ball games. He taught morality. If he heard us cussing, we ran laps until we dropped. When he found out our star fullback was bragging about his sexual exploits, he benched him. We loved our coach because he was tough—but clean. And because he gave us confidence.

I remember the Sunday night before the big Thanksgiving game with our longtime rival. Both teams were undefeated, but the other fellows were much bigger and much faster. I was standing in front of the church building after the service that night. The coach had insisted we attend church someplace. (That was, sadly, another era than the one in which we live today.) Most of us went to

the Baptist church because that was where he went. One of the deacons asked me, "Do you think you can whip the Eagles on Thursday?"

"I don't know," I told the deacon. "They're a lot bigger than we are."

Then I felt the coach's arm around my shoulder. I didn't know he had overheard my fearful answer. "They're bigger, but you're better. Don't forget it."

We won on Thanksgiving.

I've never forgotten that coach nor his ability to instill confidence in mediocre kids, making us exceed far above what we thought were our limits.

My New Testament hero is Barnabas, the "encourager," who first vouched for Paul in Jerusalem when everyone else was afraid of him. Later he went to Tarsus and encouraged Paul to return to the ministry. "We need you in Antioch."

It was Barnabas who stood up for John Mark when the rest of the church called him a quitter. "You know, son, everyone isn't called to missions. Why not try writing instead?"

In his book, *In the Arena*, former President Richard Nixon writes of the acute depression he experienced after he resigned in shame and then went through major surgery. In his hospital room, with the curtains drawn, he told his wife he wanted to die. Then, just at his lowest moment, a nurse came in, opened the drapes and pointed at a small plane flying back and forth in front of his window. It was pulling a sign: "God Loves You, and So Do We."

Nixon said seeing that sign—and the prayers he knew were behind it—gave him the courage to recover. He discovered later that Ruth Graham, Billy's wife, had arranged for the plane to fly around the hospital until the deposed president saw the sign.

Most of us have no idea the strength that comes with a little sign of love given to those in the black pit of life. During that black period in my life this past summer, while I was still reeling from the possibility of death from cancer, calls and cards of faith kept the light burning in my darkening life. Some came from people I had forgotten about; others from people I had insulted. All brought love and increased faith.

Little acts of kindness, forgotten by those who perform them, but lifesavers to those who receive them. ■

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