



Overcoming Discouragement

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The Jews had been defeated by Nebuchadnezzar and, because of their long and extended rebellion to God, the Lord allowed them to be exiled to Babylon. Yet, now their appointed time of judgment had passed; it was time for the Lord's promise to be fulfilled. Indeed, He had assured them, "After seventy years...I will visit you, and perform my good word toward you, in causing you to return to this place" (Jeremiah 29:10 KJV).

Initiated by the fasting and prayer of the prophet Daniel, Israel had entered a season of divine visitation: men with both integrity and vision were raised up and financial provisions came. The display of divine grace had created an atmosphere of awe and excitement among the people of God - He was "causing [them] to return" to Israel! Yet, how He brought them back was just as miraculous: Israel's God revealed Himself to King Cyrus of Persia, a gentile king, and actually "Appointed [him] to build [the Lord] a house in Jerusalem" (2 Chronicles 36:23). In fact, Cyrus encouraged a national offering for Israel's journey; he restored the treasures taken by Nebuchadnezzar from Israel, and he issued a royal edict, legally authorizing the return of the Jews to Israel.

It was a time of great miracles, supernatural provision and fulfilled prophecy. Yet even as the exiles resettled in Jerusalem and engaged in the work of restoration, we read:

"Then the people of the land discouraged the people of Judah, and frightened them from building, and hired counselors against them to frustrate their counsel all the days of Cyrus king of Persia, even until the reign of Darius king of Persia" (Ezra 4:4-5).

Incredibly, in spite of the miracles, signs and provisions, simple discouragement neutralized their progress. Unbelievably, scholars say that their work stalled for nearly 20 years! Beloved, discouragement is an enemy that is both subtle in its attack and powerful in its ability to stop us. We must discern it when it comes and refuse to accommodate its influence when it speaks.

How Discouragement Enters

Every person with a vision from God will have serious opportunities to become discouraged as they reach for the fulfillment of their vision. Indeed, just as Israel was given a promise from God and provisions to help their return, so the Almighty has given promises and provisions to us. Your vision may be for your personal transformation, or it may be a God-inspired desire to see your family or church brought into spiritual renewal. You may even possess a citywide vision or a holy passion to see your nation turned toward God. Yet, like the Jews, we can be just as vulnerable to discouragement and its effects.

How does discouragement gain access to our souls? The answer is simple: We start evaluating our lives based upon information compiled by our senses instead of assessing our position based upon the promise and help of God. However, I don't mean we are unaware of the difficulties of our faith assignment, but that God is good and He is not hindered by our present limitations.

Consider: when God promised Abraham a child in his old age, the Bible says he "contemplated his own body, now as good as dead since he was about a hundred years old, and the deadness of Sarah's womb." Abraham didn't deny the facts of life; without growing weak in faith, he "contemplated" his situation. "Yet, with respect to the promise of God, he did not waver in unbelief but grew strong in faith, giving glory to God." He was "fully assured that what God had promised, He was able also to perform" (see Rom. 4:19-21). Discouragement comes when we only look at our circumstances without looking to the faithfulness and integrity of what God has promised.

Still, discouragement has infiltrated the minds of many. Knowing mankind's vulnerability to discouragement, Jesus taught His disciples a parable that, "at all times they ought to pray and not to lose heart" (Luke 18:1). The parable concerned a widow desperately seeking legal protection from an adversary, but she received no immediate help from her judge (see Luke 18). In spite of his resistance, however, she refuses to be discouraged from her quest; she persists until she gains her breakthrough.

The goal of Christ's teaching was to immunize His followers from discouragement; to "lose heart" is to become discouraged. Jesus assures us that God will hear us as we turn to Him in persistent prayer.

True Faith Takes Courage

We also need to know Christ is not just our Savior, but He also is the "author and perfecter" of our faith (Hebrews 12:2). In order for faith to mature, it needs situations where faith alone can sustain us. "Faith" is not merely a proper understanding of doctrinal issues; faith is the spiritual "substance of things hoped for; the evidence of things not seen" (Hebrews 11:1 KJV). We must not only possess accurate doctrines about faith; we must live by faith as well.

Indeed, there are times when, for faith to develop, we must trust God in spite of how things appear. Jesus often told people to take courage, for their faith had saved them (see Matthew 9:2; 9:22; etc.). There will always be times when, against the glaring face of a negative reality, true faith arises, appropriates courage and locks into the integrity of God's promise. We must let faith arise in the context of resistance. This is the faith that touches God's heart.

The enemy comes to discourage or remove the courage from our hearts, and thus causes us to withdraw into unbelief. To win our fight of faith, we must not surrender to discouragement. Yes, times will come when we will ask God for greater wisdom; certainly, we will adjust our attitudes and become both flexible and wiser as we process the faith assignment destiny has set before us. But we must not give up: "For yet in a very little while, He who is coming will come, and will not delay. But My righteous one shall live by faith; and if he shrinks back, My soul has no pleasure in him" (Hebrews 10:37-38).

Hall of Faith

The above scripture is part of an introduction to Hebrews, chapter 11, which chronicles the heroic stories of those who pleased God with their faith. All of them had to endure the test of time; often the delays seemed so permanent and the odds against them insurmountable, yet none of these men and women allowed discouragement to dim the brightness of their faith. The persevering quality of their hearts - the fact that they stood in the storms of doubt and circumstances and refused to shrink away from God's promise - filled God's heart with pleasure, and He answered their faith.

Part of the testimony of those with overcoming faith is that they conquered kingdoms, performed acts of righteousness, obtained promises, shut the mouths of lions, quenched the power of fire, escaped the edge of the sword, from weakness were made strong, became mighty in war, put foreign armies to flight" (Hebrews 11:33-34).

I absolutely love this scripture: "they conquered kingdoms...put foreign armies to flight." Beloved, a foreign army with weapons named "perversion," "immorality" and "corruption" has invaded our nation and sought to occupy our culture. It has eroded the conscience of our society, and it seeks to carry off our sons and daughters into captivity. We must fight.

You say, "But Francis, I'm weary."

Yes, there are times when we all get weary. But we have the help of God with us. Consider His promise:

"Behold, My Servant, whom I uphold; My chosen one in whom My soul delights. I have put My Spirit upon Him; He will bring forth justice to the nations...He will not be disheartened or crushed..." (Isaiah 42:1-4).

Christ will be not "disheartened or crushed." Why? The Spirit of God "upholds" Him, and the Spirit of God upholds Christ in us as well. Are you God's servant? Then turn to Him and find new strength. You may be wounded or struck, but as we abide in Christ, we too will be neither "disheartened or crushed."

You say, "I live in Florida (or the Southeastern USA or the Caribbean). I've been discouraged by the destruction from these many storms." Yet, even in the most difficult times, God is there with you. Have you noticed the names and sequence of the hurricanes that roared through Florida: Charley, Frances, Ivan and Jeanne? The meaning of these names reveals a message: Charley-man, Frances- free, Ivan- God is good, Jeanne- gracious and merciful. Together, they say, "Man (is) free; God is good, gracious and merciful." If we look, we will see that, in the midst of these storms, God was good, gracious and merciful to many. Those who see God standing with them in the storms are free indeed.

A number from the USA were discouraged by the first debate between the presidential candidates. I heard folks lamenting that their candidate "did poorly. He could hardly speak in sentences." Remember, dear friend, the Lord has used people who were slow of speech in the past (see Ex 3). The issue is not how clever we are with words, but whether God will back up our stammering with His power. Let us pray for our President, and where he has made mistakes, whether in speech or even in administration of the nation, let us intercede that God will work good out even from mistakes.

Dear one, there is a spiritual war raging, whether it is over the future of our world or the future of our souls, we cannot shrink back into unbelief. Let us be strong and of good courage. Let us seek God and find new strength in prayer. And let us never give in to the voice of discouragement.

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