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“Seeing we have this ministry, as we have received mercy, we faint not” (II Corinthians 4:1).

Dealing With Discouragement

Central Truth: Despite failures, the believers must continue in Christian ministry.

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Topic: Depression; Discouragement.

Expectations may go unrealized. Plans may fail. Problems may develop. But the Christian must not become discouraged and falter in his service for God.

It takes a great discipline of mind and emotions to bear up when all is falling down. A giddy optimism which refuses to face facts is not what is needed. But a solemn conviction that “*all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose*” (Romans 8:28) is essential in Christian service.

Take your eyes off the circumstances and keep them on the Lord. “*Look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen: for the things which are seen are temporal; but the things which are not seen are eternal*” (II Corinthians 4:18). Jesus did not grow discouraged. Neither should the followers of Jesus. Despite failures, the believer must continue serving faithfully.

I. DEFINITION OF DISCOURAGEMENT

To discourage is “to dishearten; to make less confident or hopeful; to lose courage.” The prefix *dis-* indicates the negative of what follows. Disinherit means not to inherit. Disappear means not to appear. Disagree means not to agree. So discourage means not to have courage.

The King James Version of the Bible uses the term “*faint*” to indicate

the loss of heart which is discouragement. Jesus taught that prayer is a good protection against discouragement (Luke 18:1). The apostle Paul promised a reward to those who do not grow discouraged (Galatians 6:9).

Discouragement means to cease one's effort because hope of success is gone.

In practical terms, one is discouraged when he loses his expectation so that he ceases to serve. It is a tragic condition mentally, emotionally, and spiritually. It is a kind of bankruptcy.

II. SCOPE OF DISCOURAGEMENT

A. Ancient saints dealt often with discouragement. Elijah won a great contest for God on Mount Carmel, then sank into the depths of despair immediately afterwards (I Kings 19). It seems strange that a man who could pray down fire from God in heaven would suffer discouragement. Jonah survived three days and three nights in the belly of the great fish and turned a pagan city to repentance toward God, but he became so discouraged that he wanted to die (Jonah 4). David was a man after God's own heart, but he became so discouraged upon the death of his son that his kingdom was endangered (II Samuel 19). Yes, men and women of God often are beset with the problem.

Charles H. Spurgeon, one of England's greatest preachers, said, *"I am the subject of depression of spirit so fearful that I hope none of you ever gets to such extremes of wretchedness as I go to."* Martin Luther called his discouragement *"close to the gates of death and hell."* Do not be amazed if you face the problem.

III. CAUSES OF DISCOURAGEMENT

A. There are physical causes of discouragement. Failing health, fatigue, drugs, and chemical changes in the body (as after the birth of a baby) can cause mood swings which include discouragement and more severe depression. They do not indicate that one is less spiritual, only that he is human.

B. There are psychological causes of discouragement. Upsetting experiences (like the death of a loved one, II Samuel 19:1-7) can bring on discouragement. Unfulfilled expectations, as people's failure to respond to one's ministry to them, can cause a faithful servant to be discouraged (I Kings 19:14). Betrayal by trusted friends can bring on discouragement. In each case the emotions are a large factor in the experience.

C. There are spiritual causes of discouragement. Sometimes

discouragement is punishment for sins against God (Deuteronomy 28:65). Jealousy over the advancement of a competitor can produce discouragement (I Samuel 18:7-11). Sins of unresolved anger, at people or at God, can cause one's spirits to fall into despondency (Jonah 3:5-10; 4:1-3). Sins of unresolved guilt can produce the same response (Matthew 27:3-5). Unrealized goals in one's spiritual ministry can result in a loss of courage and zeal for God (1 Kings 19:10).

There is no single cause for discouragement, but there is a single remedy. Turn to God when you are losing heart. Say with the psalmist, *“Why art thou cast down, O my soul? and why art thou disquieted within me? hope in God: for I shall yet praise him, who is the health of my countenance, and my God”* (Psalm 43:5). In all times of discouragement, take your burden to the Lord and leave it there.

IV. REMEDY FOR DISCOURAGEMENT

You cannot afford to ignore a discouraged spirit any more than you can afford to ignore a sick body. There are steps to take which will help restore your courage and vitality in living.

A. Identify the cause. Ask yourself, “Why am I full of heaviness, despondent, and filled with misery?” (That is what the psalmist asked himself in Psalm 43:5.) Is your problem physical, psychological, or spiritual? An answer to that question will open the door to finding a remedy.

B. Refuse to withdraw in self-pity. That is what one wishes to do in times of discouragement. Elijah went into the wilderness and sat under a juniper bush. Jonah went out of the city and sat under a gourd vine on the hillside. But to withdraw is to wallow in a morass of self-pity, and that makes the problem worse.

C. Be busy at God-given responsibilities. God came to Elijah in his desert location and gave him a new, threefold commission: (1) anoint Hazael to be the king of Syria; (2) anoint Jehu to be king of Israel; and (3) anoint Elisha to be the prophet to succeed Elijah (I Kings 19:15, 16). The world does not stop when one person becomes discouraged. Life goes on. Be a part of it.

Thomas Edison tried fifty thousand experiments in his effort to make a nickel-iron-alkaline battery. When someone asked him if he was discouraged, he replied, “Not at all. I have found fifty thousand ways that do not work.” That's the spirit!

D. Practice praise. It is impossible to praise God and remain discouraged. God inhabits the praises of His people (Psalm 22:3). Where His

presence is recognized, discouragement cannot remain. David's songs of praise to God, which he played upon his harp, lifted the spirit of depression from King Saul (I Samuel 16:22). Even if you do not feel like it, "*offer the sacrifice of praise to God continually*" (Hebrews 13:15). Gloom is lifted when the Son shines in your heart!

E. Refuse to major on the negative. The prophet Habakkuk knew that a military invasion would overrun his land and the Babylonians would take his people into captivity. Yet he ended his book praising God in spite of the utter desolation which lay ahead (Habakkuk 3:17~19). He could have mourned over all the loss. Instead, he rejoiced in God who is in control. When all else falls, God still stands. Keep your thoughts directed toward Him.

F. Seek spiritual companionship. The prophet Elijah reached the point of depression where he asked God to take his life. Instead, the Lord gave him a young man named Elisha to be his companion (I Kings 19:16, 19-21). That companionship became a strength to God's prophet and he, in turn, trained his younger companion to be a prophet of God. The fellowship with God's people encourages us, also (Hebrews 10:25).

V. BENEFIT OF DISCOURAGEMENT

A. Discouragement can bring lessons from God. Moses and Israel were discouraged when they came to the oasis at Marah and discovered that the water was too bitter to drink (Exodus 15:23-26). They did not know that God had a purpose behind that, to make them "*a statute and an ordinance*" in order to "*prove them*" (verse 25). He showed them that, as He healed the waters, He could heal them. The lesson to be learned was, "*I am the LORD that healeth thee*" (verse 26). Through those discouraging times they learned "*that man doth not live by bread only, but by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of the LORD doth man live*" (Deuteronomy 8:3). What lesson is God teaching you through your times of discouragement? The lesson is there if you are willing to receive it.

B. Discouragement never separates from God. He is always there. He was at Marah before Israel arrived. He was there while they complained. He was there as they prayed. He was there to show the tree that would purify the waters. He was there to teach the lesson to be learned. He was there to give them a promise of future healing as it was needed. How much Israel would have missed if she had not come to Marah! Learn to thank God for what you learn from your trials.

C. Discouragement is the time for prayer. The people complained at Marah; Moses prayed at Marah. What a difference! You can complain or you can pray when your discouragements come. Complaint compounds the problem; prayer solves the problem. *“The eyes of the LORD are upon the righteous, and his ears are open unto their cry”* (Psalm 34:15). Don’t worry; pray!

VI. STRENGTH IN DISCOURAGEMENT

A. Pure motives will strengthen you. Renounce all that is dishonest and receive the Word of God honestly. That is your first great step in overcoming discouragement (II Corinthians 4:1, 2).

B. A selfless spirit will strengthen you (II Corinthians 4:5-12). Forget about yourself and concentrate on Christ. You are a representative of Jesus Christ (verse 5). You are a recipient of the light of God (verse 6). You are an earthen vessel to bear the message of God (verse 7). You are a victor in all of life's trials (verses 8-10). You are an agent of God's blessing (verses 11, 12). It would be tragic if you became bogged down in self-pity over your troubles and did not function as the agent of God's blessings. *“It matters not what happens to me so long as God is glorified”* is the Christian spirit. Cultivate it.

C. A remembrance of the reward will strengthen you (II Corinthians 4:16-18). The outward man may perish, but the inward man grows stronger daily. We may endure a light affliction, but a much greater weight of glory is ahead. The things seen may disturb us, but they are temporary. We look at the things unseen and eternal, and are encouraged to keep on.

Discipline your mind in times of discouragement. Analyze what you think about, then make yourself think about the right things. Do not major on faults, failures, or losses. Look to God. Keep on trusting and obeying. God will work it out for good since you love God and obey Him (Romans 8:28).

Questions

1. What is discouragement?
2. How is discouragement related to depression?
3. How does the truth of Romans 8:28 overcome discouragement?
4. Why do saints of God (like Elijah) experience discouragement?
5. What might cause a Christian to be discouraged?

6. How does Psalm 43:5 relate to discouragement?
7. What should one do when he is discouraged?
8. What can one learn from his discouragements?
9. How can one be strong in discouraging times?
10. How is your mind the key to dealing with discouragement?