

Discouragement: Portraits of Discouragement

Straight Talk – Part V

Selected Scripture

Introduction

Today, we are going to look at a word in the scriptures – the word “discouragement”. In this word, we see the word “courage,” which comes from the Latin root “cor,” meaning “heart”. It is from this that we get the idea of “having heart” or “having courage”. This leads to the English idea of “to encourage,” meaning “to put heart in”. So, “to discourage” then, means “to take heart out”. We will study today, not only the English words “discouragement” and “encouragement,” but also the Greek words used throughout the scriptures in this vain.

Legend has it, and you may have heard the story, that Satan was displaying all of his weapons to the imps of hell. He had them on tables, and attached to each instrument was a price tag or the value of that instrument. He, of course, had all of his tools there; such as: deceit, murder, gossip, gluttony, and so forth. One imp, who was looking at all of the weapons, noticed one that was of extreme value. It was so greatly priced that all of the others paled in its presence and by its value. This tool was that of discouragement.

The imp of hell asked, “Why is this tool of discouragement priced so high?”

Satan replied, “Because this one rarely fails me – it usually works.”

I, personally, do not know of any more debilitating weapon that Satan can use in my life than discouragement. This can work, even when I look at all of the things about me that are involved in my life and there is very little to be discouraged about. It is quite strange the way that little corkscrew can begin working in my spirit and, for no apparent reason, I can become discouraged.

I know, when I speak on a word like “discouragement,” that I have a captive audience. We have all experienced discouraging times; we have all had times when, in effect, the wind is taken out of our sails and we do not really have the strength to take another step.

I want to pull the mask off of discouragement today, by looking at it in the scriptures and by giving solutions to it. There are situations in the scriptures where discouragement occurs. I am looking up the words “take heart,” “take courage,” “discouragement,” and “encouragement”.

Situations Where Discouragement Occurs

Let us take a look at several situations in the scriptures where discouragement occurs.

1. The first is in Matthew, chapter 9. One of the reasons discouragement can occur, as we will see in this scripture, is because of prolonged illness.

Have you ever experienced discouragement because of prolonged illness? We will look at two situations where this occurs in Matthew chapter 9.

Look at Matthew 9:1-2. The illness discussed in these verses is a permanent illness. Note the words that Jesus says.

Getting into a boat, Jesus crossed over the sea and came to His own city. And they brought to Him a paralytic lying on a bed. Seeing their faith, Jesus said to the paralytic, “Take courage, son; your sins are forgiven.”

In other words, Jesus first says, “Let Me put heart in you.”

Then, of course, Jesus gives the paralytic something to be encouraged about, because He says, “Your sins are forgiven.”

Continue to Matthew 9:3-5.

And some of the scribes said to themselves, “This fellow blasphemes.” And Jesus knowing their thoughts said, “Why are you thinking evil in your hearts? Which is easier, to say, ‘Your sins are forgiven,’ or to say, ‘Get up and walk?’”

Anyone, by the way, can say, “Your sins are forgiven,” but no one can say, “Get up and walk.”

Continue to Matthew 9:6.

“But so that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins” – then He said to the paralytic – “Get up, pick up your bed and go home.”

By implication, this paralytic man was totally discouraged. Why? Because of a prolonged illness.

Now look at Matthew 9:20-21. This is also a prolonged illness in which a woman has an issue of blood or a continuing hemorrhaging of blood. She comes and touches Jesus.

And a woman who had been suffering from a hemorrhage for twelve years, came up behind Him and touched the fringe of His cloak; for she was saying to herself, “If I only touch His garment, I will get well.”

This woman literally, clutched Jesus’ garment. Now look at Matthew 9:22a and note Jesus’ words.

But Jesus turning and seeing her said, “Daughter, take courage . . .”

In other words, Jesus says, “Let Me give you heart.”

This woman was without heart; she was totally discouraged. Why? For the same reason that you might get discouraged when you have a prolonged illness.

There is something debilitating about an illness in which we never get well, and our heart is taken from us. This is a reason we may experience discouragement.

2. The second situation of discouragement that we will look at is in Numbers, chapter 32. This is discouragement because of selfish disunity.

Look at Numbers 32:1-2.

Now the sons of Reuben and the sons of Gad had an exceedingly large number of livestock. So when they saw the land of Jazer and the land of Gilead, that it was indeed a place suitable for livestock, the sons of Gad and the sons of Reuben came and spoke to Moses and to Eleazar the priest and to the leaders of the congregation, saying,

I am going to skip verse 3, for obvious reasons, and continue to Numbers 32:4-5.

“the land which the Lord conquered before the congregation of Israel, is a land for

livestock; and your servants have livestock.” They said, “If we have found favor in your sight, let this land be given to your servants as a possession; do not take us across the Jordan.”

This land is on the opposite side of the Jordan from which all the rest of the children of Israel are headed. Continue to Numbers 32:6.

But Moses said to the sons of Gad and to the sons of Reuben, “Shall your brothers go to war while you yourselves sit here?”

In other words, “Shall all the others go in and conquer the land while you sit here?”

Note Moses’ words in Numbers 32:7.

Now why are you discouraging the sons of Israel from crossing over into the land which the Lord has given them?

Moses says, “Why are you taking the heart out of your brethren? You should be joining them. You should be matching swords. You should be in the company of people who are saying, in unanimity, ‘Let’s go conquer the land.’ You are saying, ‘This land looks like pretty good grazing land. I think my cattle can handle it over here. I think I’ll stay. You guys run along and fight the giants of the land.’”

The implication is that when there is disunity; when there is a parting of ways; when there is no spirit of pursuing similar ideals, goals, and objectives, whether it is in a family or in a church or whatever, when there is the splitting of hearts, there is the taking out of hearts; there is discouragement.

I am sure you have seen this in small ways. It happened in our family a couple of days ago. Four of us wanted to go to Pizza Hut and one wanted to go to Kentucky Fried Chicken. We went to Pizza Hut and one went along with the little “poochy” lip. This is a simple example of something a family wants to do, but one in the family does not want to do it. Someone is losing heart and discouragement can come.

A more classic example can occur in a church. A church is heading in a certain direction and it is very important that all the members agree on the pursuit of that direction. If there is disunity, created by perhaps, the selfishness of someone’s heart, there is the taking out of the hearts of the other members and discouragement can come. Many of us have been in churches that are discouraged because there is no unanimity or push towards similar objectives and goals.

3. One more situation of discouragement in the scriptures that we will look at is in II Chronicles, chapter 19. This is discouragement that comes from distinctive living.

This is a classic Old Testament illustration of something we would expect to find written by the apostles to the New Testament church.

Begin with II Chronicles 19:5. These are judges that have just been appointed in the land.

He appointed judges in the land in all the fortified cities of Judah, city by city.

Now note II Chronicles 19:9-10.

Then he charged them saying, "Thus you shall do in the fear of the Lord, faithfully and wholeheartedly. Whenever any dispute comes to you from your brethren who live in their cities, between blood and blood, between law and commandment, statutes and ordinances, you shall warn them so that they may not be guilty before the Lord, and wrath may not come on you and your brethren. Thus you shall do and you will not be guilty."

In other words, the judges were to present a pure standard of living and were to hold to that. When anyone came in with a dispute – whether it was popular or not; whether people appreciated them or not – they were to tell the truth; they were to judge correctly.

Now would this kind of job be easy? Absolutely not. How simple is it for you to live for Jesus Christ in your community? How easy is it for you to maintain a standard of purity in this corrupt society?

These judges faced similar difficulties. Look at II Chronicles 19:11.

Behold, Amariah the chief priest will be over you in all that pertains to the Lord, and Zebadiah the son of Ishmael, the ruler of the house of Judah, in all that pertains to the king. Also the Levites shall be officers before you. Act resolutely [courageously], and the Lord be with the upright.

In other words, "act with courage" or "act with great heart".

Situations where discouragement may occur could be in a prolonged illness; could be because of disunity in the family or in the church over something small or

something great; could be the result of living a lifestyle that is an indictment to our society. You may be discouraged – especially young people who stand for Jesus Christ; who maintain purity in the school system. Parents must understand that this is a setting where discouragement will occur and, along with the church youth leaders, encourage them in the Lord. These are situations where discouragement occurs.

Portraits of Discouragement Nehemiah

Now I want to take a close look at two men who faced discouragement. The first is one of my favorite characters of the Old Testament and his name is Nehemiah. Turn to Nehemiah chapter 4 where we will find four reasons discouragement will come.

You may remember the story of Nehemiah. The children of Israel are rebuilding the wall. In the process, they are facing tremendous odds. The arch enemies of these Jews – Sanballat, Tobiah, and Geshem – are trying to incite war against them so they cannot rebuild their city. In the events of this chapter, it seems that these enemies are about to succeed. Look at Nehemiah 4:3.

Now Tobiah the Ammonite was near him and he said, "Even what they are building – if a fox should jump on it, he would break their stone wall down!"

In other words, Tobiah is taunting the Jewish people, saying, "That wall you're building – if a little fox would come along and jump on it, he'd tear down your lousy workmanship."

These enemies seek to discourage the Jews.

Note what the Jewish people say, in Nehemiah 4:4.

Hear, O our God, how we are despised! Return their reproach on their own heads and give them up for plunder in a land of captivity. Do not forgive their iniquity and let not their sin be blotted out before You, for they have demoralized the builders.

This is an interesting prayer to pray for their enemies. These enemies have discouraged; taken the heart out of the builders.

Continue to Nehemiah 4:6. Note the last phrase concerning the height of the wall.

So we built the wall and the whole wall was joined together to half its height . . .

Now we know that it is when we get a job half finished that doing the work really gets tricky. The Israelites are halfway to completion – just enough to see some progress, yet also enough to see the amount of work they will need to do to finish the wall. It is at this point that we read, in Nehemiah 4:7-8,

Now when Sanballat, Tobiah, the Arabs, the Ammonites and the Ashdodites heard that the repair of the walls of Jerusalem went on, and that the breaches began to be closed, they were very angry. And all of them conspired together to come and fight against Jerusalem and to cause a disturbance in it.

Note the response of the Jewish people, in Nehemiah 4:9.

But we prayed to our God, and because of them we set up a guard against them day and night.

Four reasons discouragement comes

There are four things that cause discouragement to set in. Let us look at these.

1. The first thing that discouragement is created by is a loss of strength.

Notice what is said of the people during this particular juncture, in Nehemiah 4:10a.

Thus in Judah it was said, “The strength of the burden bearers is failing, . . .”

In other words, there was a loss of strength. The builders were tired; they were physically worn out.

In our lives, men and women, I think discouragement finds great inroads when we are physically beat.

It is interesting that Jesus Christ was tempted by Satan after what period of time in His life? After forty days of fasting. At a time when Jesus was physically spent; when, I believe, He was tired. In fact, the angels came and ministered to Jesus after the temptation.

I think there is something to learn from this, ladies and gentlemen. We may think we can go on and on and on without a break, without stopping, without any rest. Satan knows that when we get to this point, we are wide open for discouragement. Why? Because as much as we work; as much we do, we can still see so much to be done.

2. Secondly, discouragement is created by a loss of vision.

This is not too surprising, and it follows the loss of strength. Look at the next phrase, Nehemiah 4:10b,

. . . yet there is much rubbish; . . .

In other words, their eyes are no longer on this magnificent wall that they are building and all that it will do for the Jewish nation to give them a home. Now, their eyes are on the rubbish.

The walls had previously been torn down. These Jews were basically, rebuilding the walls with the stones that lay about where the foundation once was. They had a lot of cleaning up to do. They would then, take the rocks and prepare them, perhaps chip away the rough edges, and build the wall back up. Their eyes were now on the rubbish and they were saying, “There is so much.” They had forgotten that they were building the walls of a city.

I like the story of three men who were mixing mortar on the side of the street in front of a building project. A man came along and asked the first man mixing mortar, “What are you doing?”

The first man said, “I’m mixing mortar, you dummy, can’t you see?”

The man asked the second man mixing mortar, “What are you doing?”

The second man said, “I’m building a wall to this building.”

The man then, went to the third man mixing mortar, and asked, “And what are you doing, sir?”

The third man replied, “I am building a magnificent cathedral.”

I love the third man’s answer! If I get exhausted and my eyes are turned away from the goal; away from the object of desire for God, whatever it may be, I will lose vision.

When a church gets so caught up in the stuff – the details, the plans, the work, all of the tangle – and forgets that their purpose on planet Earth is to build up the saints and to evangelize and reach the community for Jesus Christ, then they lose their vision. I think I am preaching this to myself!

These Jewish builders had now lost their vision. They no longer saw a wall; they saw rubbish.

3. Thirdly, discouragement is created by a loss of confidence.

Look at Nehemiah 4:10c,

. . . and we ourselves are unable to rebuild the wall.

The Israelites knew from the start that rebuilding the wall would be quite a task. Now, however, they are overwhelmed with this fact. They are saying, "It's too big for us, God." They are reaching for the towel that they are about to throw in.

4. Fourthly, they have also become discouraged by a lost sense of security.

Look at Nehemiah 4:11.

Our enemies said, "They will not know or see until we come among them, kill them and put a stop to the work."

Continue to Nehemiah 4:12a and note who is talking and how many times they repeat themselves.

When the Jews who lived near them came and told us ten times, . . .

These Jews are not part of the solution; these Jews are not helping to rebuild the wall, they are continuing their farming in their fields. What do they say ten times? Their words, in Nehemiah 4:12b, are certainly not words of an optimist,

. . . "They will come up against us from every place where you may turn."

Now that was encouraging from these Jews who had not thrown in their lot! So the workers around Nehemiah were, all of the sudden, looking over their shoulder and thinking, "At any minute the enemies could take my life."

These Jews had forgotten that from the moment they began the project, it would take the divine protection of God. The pessimists came along and said, "They're coming against you to attack and kill you."

Every project will have its pessimist, I am sure. This past week, I was reading of Robert Fulton when he was unveiling the coal driven boat with the paddle wheel. It was anchored in the water and he was stoking the furnace. People had come from miles around to stand on the side of the river to watch. In this crowd, there was one man who simply did not like Robert Fulton. Historians recall that he stood on the side of the bank and shouted, "You'll never start it. You'll never start it."

All of the sudden, that boat belched some smoke into the air and the paddle wheel began to turn. All the people on the bank began to look around at that

one guy. He caught himself quickly, however, and began to yell, "You'll never stop it."

These Jews said, "You'll never build this wall. It won't happen."

Soon the workers began to believe it and grew discouraged. They almost threw in their towel.

David

We will return to our discussion of Nehemiah in a moment, but I want to look at another man and that is David. Turn to Psalm 13. Let me give you four attitudes that discouragement creates. We have felt all of these. Perhaps you are experiencing them today.

Four attitudes discouragement creates

1. The first attitude that discouragement creates is, "God, You have forgotten me."

In Psalm 13, David is being hunted by Saul. The Judean hillside is barren. He is hungry and has men with him to take care of. The context is one of great gloom. Here is the man, the heir apparent, running for his life, and he says, "God, You've forgotten me."

Look at Psalm 13:1a.

How long, O Lord? Will You forget me forever? . . .

David throws in the editorial "forever".

When we are discouraged, we tend to exaggerate, do we not? We say, "Lord, are You going to forget me forever?"

Do you remember a time when you were crushed; when you were discouraged? You probably thought, as I have thought, that God had forgotten you and He would never remember you – that He had forgotten you forever.

2. The second attitude that discouragement creates is, "God doesn't care about me."

Notice Psalm 13:1b.

. . . How long will You hide Your face from me?

In other words, "God, You promised to meet my needs. You promised to bear my burdens. You promised to do this and that. But now, You are playing hide and seek. You're somewhere and I can't find You. When will You show You're face again?"

We get the idea that God is no longer trustworthy. We think He does not care about us.

3. The third attitude that discouragement creates is, “God doesn’t provide answers.”

Note Psalm 13:2a. David words are very insightful.

How long shall I take counsel in my soul ...

The words “take counsel” are basically one original word “plan”. In other words, David is asking, “How long will I have to plan my steps? How long will I have to take care of my life and plan my way? How am I going to circumvent Saul’s army? How am I going to survive? Where am I going to get food? How am I going to plan things out?”

A discouraged person is usually planning their next step. This stems from the fact that they believe God has abandoned them.

4. The fourth attitude that discouragement creates is, “God won’t reveal the length of my trial.”

Note Psalm 13:2b. David goes one step further and says,

... How long will my enemy be exalted over Me?

Underline the words “how long,” which appear four times in two verses. In Psalm 13:1-2, David asks,

- verse 1a – ***How long, O Lord? Will You forget me forever? ...***
- verse 1b – ***... How long will You hide Your face from me?***
- verse 2a – ***How long shall I take counsel in my soul, having sorrow in my heart all the day? ...***
- verse 2b – ***... How long will my enemy be exalted over me?***

When we get discouraged, what do we say? We say, “How long, Lord? Forever?”

We get the idea that God has designed a trial that will last forever. Ladies and gentlemen, He not only designs the depth of our trial, He designs the length of our trial. There is an ending.

Application – Courage Builders for the Believer

Now let me give, by way of application, some courage builders. Two distinguished men who served God, felt the terror of discouragement; felt disheartened. We could easily look again at the book

of Nehemiah and the Psalms, but since we want to look for the word “courage, let us do some jumping around in the scriptures.

1. The first courage builder is that encouragement is engendered by Christian fellowship.

Turn to Hebrew chapter 10. The word “courage,” or “encouragement,” is used in this fantastic portion of scripture. Look at Hebrews 10:23 and notice the key word “hope” in this verse.

Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for He who promised is faithful;

Now sometimes it is not good enough to just believe this, so in Hebrews 10:24-25, it goes on to say,

and let us consider how to stimulate one another to love and good deeds, not forsaking our own assembling together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another; and all the more, as you see the day drawing near.

This is fantastic! One of the great courage builders for the believer is rubbing shoulders with other believers. And one of the great purposes of church is to stimulate, to provoke each other.

What you have to say in church to someone else is as important as what I, as the pastor, have to say to you. The way you shake a hand; the way you smile; the way you ask, “How are you doing?” is as crucial as what I am saying.

This is why we go to church. One of the great courage builders is engendered by Christian fellowship.

Let us look at another passage with the same idea. Turn to Acts chapter 28.

One of the things I appreciate about the apostle Paul is that he was very transparent. He did not come across as the bionic apostle who never had problems; who was always strong for the task, he let us in on things that encouraged him. I love this passage, in which Paul had one objective. Where has Paul wanted to go for nearly his entire Christian life? What city has he wanted to go to? Rome. He is finally making it to Rome! Note what happens. Look at Acts 28:14.

There we found some brethren, and were invited to stay with them for seven days; and thus we came to Rome.

I would imagine he had an exclamation point in his mind when he wrote this! Continue to Acts 28:15a.

And the brethren [Christians], when they heard about us, came from there as far as the Market of Appius and Three Inns to meet us . . .

Now he is talking about distances of forty-three miles from the market and thirty-three miles from Three Inns. Perhaps these people walked in order to encourage and welcome Paul. They thought it important enough to make a trek of forty-three miles to say, “Paul, it’s great to have you in Rome. It’s wonderful. Can we pray together? . . .”

It is kind of difficult for me to pick up a pen and write someone a note or make a phone call to encourage someone. These people were walking a total of nearly eighty miles just to encourage.

Did the encouragement work? Look at the last part of Acts 28:15.

. . . and when Paul saw them, he thanked God and took courage.

The encouragement of these Christians gave him heart. Paul knew the mission he had and probably knew he would never survive it. The fact that the brethren came to meet him, gave him great courage.

2. The second courage builder is that encouragement is a result of instruction.

Encouragement not only comes from the brethren, but from instruction. Look at Romans 15:4-5. Note that the reference to “whatever was written in earlier times” is referring to the Old Testament.

For whatever was written in earlier times was written for our instruction, so that through perseverance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope. Now may the God who gives perseverance and encouragement grant you to be of the same mind with one another according to Christ Jesus;

Why? Continue to Romans 15:5.

so that with one accord you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Paul’s great point of this passage, as you know from just a casual reading, is that the Old Testament scriptures were given for the purpose of creating hope; of giving heart so that we would persevere.

How often do you and I look at the Old Testament in that way? When I need encouragement, I go to Ephesians, not Habakkuk.

Paul, however, is saying something rather interesting that I take as a challenge. One of the exciting things about going through the Old Testament with you is that I have found tremendous encouragement where I never thought I would – in the Old Testament. Paul is implying that if we will submit to the Old Testament scriptures; if we will submit to, obey, and practice what is written therein, we will be given heart; we will be given courage. So the Old Testament scriptures are not just for reading, obviously, they are for instruction, which involves obedience.

Do you remember the story of the businessman who had to leave town hurriedly? He had about three hundred fifty employees. On the private jet plane, he wrote a letter to his employees telling them what he wanted done and mailed it back to them. Each employee got a copy, giving specific details of what was to happen while he was away. Finally, after several months, he returned.

As his limousine pulled up to the corporate headquarters, this businessman noticed, to his dismay, weeds growing and ivy growing on the face of the building, the grass had not been cut, the sidewalk was beginning to show some decay. He walked in and, to his amazement, his employees were talking and drinking coffee and were involved in horse play. He thought, “My word, what has happened here?”

So, he called all of his employees together. The first question the businessman asked was obviously, “Did you get my letter?”

The employees said, “Well, sure we did. We had meetings every week, and studied your letter. Some people, who were ambitious, memorized some of your letter. Isn’t that exciting?”

The businessman said, “Did you think to put it into practice?”

“Oh, actually, we were too busy studying the letter.”

The point is obvious. If we do not submit to the Scriptures; if we do not practice what we have learned; if we just come here and soak; if we become a

“fat cat” and learn all that we can possibly learn just to learn it and not to put it into practice, then the weeds of discontent; the ivy of discouragement will grow over our hearts.

Paul said, if we want to tear that away; if we want to clean that up, then obey – follow the instruction of the Old Testament and it will give us courage; it will give us heart.

3. The third courage builder is that encouragement is sustained by a relationship.

Turn to Psalm 27. This is a beautiful passage that is familiar to us. David just pulls the mask off. In Psalm 27:13, he says,

I would have despaired unless I had believed that I would see the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living.

In other words, David would have given up; he would have thrown in the towel if he had not believed.

There is no doubt, ladies and gentlemen, that there is a tremendous amount of implication around the word “believed”. When we are discouraged, it sometimes seems that we do not even want to believe.

Note what David says next, in Psalm 27:14.

Wait for the Lord; be strong, and let your heart take courage; yes, wait for the Lord.

The key is in the phrase, “wait”. We get the idea, “Okay, that means, I sit down in a corner and I wait for something to happen; I wait for the end of this trial and I grit my teeth until it’s over.”

No. The word “wait,” in the Hebrew, literally means, “to twist a chord”. David is saying, “While in the trial, twist yourself like a vine around Yahweh.”

When in a trial, do not abandon the Lord, but bind yourself tightly about Him – *that* is waiting.

This is not a passive kind of waiting, it is a waiting in which we are to seek to know God. This is a waiting in which we pray. This is a waiting in which we learn. This is a waiting in which we study. This is a waiting in which we bind ourselves around God as we wait for this discouraging time to end.

Now as we wrap this up, turn back to Nehemiah and let me give a postscript. Look at Nehemiah 6:15-16. Note the amount of time mentioned in verse 15.

So the wall was completed on the twenty-fifth of the month Elul, in fifty-two days. When all our enemies heard of it, and all the nations surrounding us saw it, they lost their

confidence; for they recognized that this work had been accomplished with the help of our God.

Ladies and gentlemen, when you and I live distinct, pure lives; when you and I refuse to abandon God, even when difficult things happen to us that may also happen to our unbelieving friends, who wonder why we would *ever* stay with *that* kind of God, when you and I live with the kind of attitude and perspective that He is a loving, sovereign God and we bind ourselves to Him, then the world has to step back and acknowledge this attitude in us and the fact that such a lifestyle *has* to be the work of God. There is no other way to figure us out, other than the fact that God is involved in our lives. Unbelievers scratch their heads and wonder. May we live this kind of life.