



Overcoming Discouragement

Theme: "Only God is fully trustworthy and his help is both necessary and totally reliable. The more we wait on God, concentrating on his reliability, the more we find our discouragement melting away, replaced by trust in God. "

Biblical Lecture: Psalm 39:1-7

Starting Questions: Have you ever felt discouraged when everything seemed right? Do we usually know how to deal with this discouragement? How do the scriptures encourage us to overcome such discouragement?

Psalm 39:1-7

I said, "I will watch my ways
and keep my tongue from sin;
I will put a muzzle on my mouth
while in the presence of the wicked."
2 So I remained utterly silent,
not even saying anything good.
But my anguish increased;
3 my heart grew hot within me.
While I meditated, the fire burned;
then I spoke with my tongue:
4 "Show me, Lord, my life's end
and the number of my days;
let me know how fleeting my life is.
5 You have made my days a mere handbreadth;
the span of my years is as nothing before you.
Everyone is but a breath,
even those who seem secure.[b]
6 "Surely everyone goes around like a mere phantom;
in vain they rush about, heaping up wealth
without knowing whose it will finally be.
7 "But now, Lord, what do I look for?
My hope is in you.

Reflection Reading

"Lord, where do I put my hope? My only hope is in you."

(Ps. 39:7)

When "Jim" left my office at church, I was elated. Our meeting had been a tough but productive one. As his boss, I worked hard to help Jim understand my expectations and where he had been falling short. I tried to be gracious as I spoke critically, and Jim received my counsel with a willing spirit. Months of supervisory effort seemed finally to be bearing fruit. An immensely talented young man, Jim had great potential to be an outstanding member of the church staff. Thus I was encouraged by his response to our meeting and looked forward with hope to our future together.

When I arrived at my office the next morning, a blank envelope sat ominously on my desk. It contained Jim's resignation letter. He was finished at the church. There was nothing I could do or say to change his mind.

At that moment I felt deeply discouraged. My hope for Jim's fruitful future at our church shriveled on the vine. I felt like a dismal failure as a boss. Who was I to think I could manage a large church staff? Maybe I should just pack up my bags and find more suitable employment.

You may not have faced something just like my experience with Jim, but I expect you have felt the heavy weight of discouragement. Maybe it came at work, as a project for which you had high hopes fell apart. Perhaps it had to do with a close relationship that splintered owing to a misunderstanding. Or your discouragement might have resulted from frustration with your inability to be the kind of person you know God wants you to be.

Discouragement ... such a common emotion ... how can we overcome it? How can we get beyond discouragement, and even learn from it?

GO AHEAD AND FEEL DISCOURAGED

First of all, if you want to overcome discouragement, allow yourself to feel discouraged. No, I don't recommend that you rev up negative feelings that aren't there. But if you are truly discouraged, don't pretend otherwise. Trust God enough to feel what you really feel.

Some Christians think that discouragement itself is something about which to be ashamed, almost as if it were a sin. One of my favorite hymns, "What a Friend We Have in Jesus," urges: "Have we trials and temptations? Is there trouble anywhere? We should never be discouraged; take it to the Lord in prayer." Perhaps in an ideal world we should never be discouraged. But in reality, discouragement is a normal part of human life. The Psalmist asked for God's help with despair (see Ps. 42-43). The Apostle Paul admitted his own deep discouragement (2 Cor. 1:8-9). If we deny our discouragement and pretend we're "just fine," we won't be able to overcome it.

UNDERSTAND YOUR DISCOURAGEMENT

If you're discouraged, why? Generally, discouragement follows on the heels of hope that doesn't pan out. For example, I had hoped that Jim would become a valuable employee. Instead, he quit, so I felt discouraged.

Knowing the source of your discouragement is essential to overcoming it. Maybe you were unrealistic in your hopes and need to learn to be more astute in your judgment (as in my situation with Jim). Maybe people you trusted let you down. Or maybe your discouragement is more generalized, a sign of burnout or broad dissatisfaction with your life. Discouragement could reflect underlying depression that is itself the symptom of deeper emotional discord. If you can accurately identify the cause of your discouragement, you'll be on the road to alleviating it.

SHARE HONESTLY WITH TRUSTED COUNSELORS

If you're discouraged, don't keep it to yourself. Don't let pride or shame prevent you from sharing honestly with people who will listen empathically and respond wisely. Your gutsy openness will bring relief for you and freedom to others.

Throughout the years at Laity Lodge, we have followed the example of Howard Butt by sharing our lives openly, including our joys and our sorrows, our successes and our disappointments. Such honesty has opened our hearts to new experiences of God's grace. In my own life, I have found that the very act of sharing my disappointment at work with my wife or another close friend often leads to a lessening of my discouragement. Their input also helps me understand why I'm discouraged and what I can do about it.

SHARE HONESTLY WITH GOD

Or, to use more common language, pray about it. Here's where I agree completely with "What a Friend We Have in Jesus." If you feel discouraged, "take it to the Lord in prayer." We can tell him everything, including the fact that we're discouraged. When we do, we begin to experience God's gracious peace.

Moreover, when we share our discouragement with the Lord, we are open to discovering his presence in the midst of our unhappiness. Perhaps God is wanting to teach us something essential through our discouragement. Maybe he is redirecting our energies, our work, or our lives.

When we take our discouragement to the Lord in prayer, we find that our hope is redirected and rekindled. With the Psalmist, we confess, "And so, Lord, where do I put my hope? My only hope is in you" (Ps. 39:7). This doesn't mean we never trust others or expect their help. But it does remind us that God alone is fully trustworthy and that his help is both necessary and utterly reliable. The more we hope in God, focusing on his trustworthiness, the more we will find our discouragement melting away, replaced by confidence in God. Thus we not only overcome discouragement, but also it becomes an avenue to spiritual growth.

Dynamic Reflection

1. How could you explain Psalm 39:7 after reading the reflection reading?
2. Do you often try to understand the reason for your discouragement?
3. Do you usually go with reliable counselors or do you always try to solve it on your own?

Application

1. How did your mentality and actions change after reflecting on this?
2. What can you do to practice this teaching in your work environment?