

Lesson 5: Overcoming Discouragement (Ezra 5:1-17)

Have you ever been discouraged? That's like asking, "Are you human?" Rare, if not non-existent, is the person who has never been discouraged. Many elders, preachers, and Bible class teachers have experienced discouragement when, despite their great effort, the local congregation fails to learn, fails to honor God or fails to cooperate as God's children.

Why do we become discouraged? Sometimes discouragement stems from a physical cause. We are simply tired and worn out from working too long and too hard without a break. Or perhaps a bodily illness inclines us toward depression and discouragement.

Another cause of discouragement is that we can be too idealistic. This is a special hazard of preachers. Warren Wiersbe observes, "The preacher, if he is dedicated at all, is a man of ideals; he wants to achieve for the glory of God. Yet, no matter how hard he prays and works, it seems that his goals forever elude him" (ibid., p. 265). Experienced preachers have at times told their local congregations that they consider themselves a failure because they haven't done enough for the cause of God. If you ask the gospel preacher who baptized over 40,000 people about discouragement, he would probably respond with a time that he could have chosen a better phrase in a sermon that would have convinced that next soul to turn to the Gospel.

Coupled with idealism, discouragement often comes when people disappoint us. We were counting on someone who let us down. We had high hopes for a person who turned against us or failed spiritually and morally. Teachers/preachers especially are subject to disappointment when someone who made a good beginning in Christ turns back to the world. It's not hard to hear the discouragement in Paul's lonely voice from prison, "Demas, having loved this present world, has deserted me and gone to Thessalonica" (2 Tim. 4:10).

Elders/Deacons/Preachers also are often the objects of criticism and slander. If you don't keep your focus on the Lord, laboring for His "well done," you can get discouraged. When Charles Spurgeon (Baptist preacher) began his ministry in London at age 20, he was barraged with criticism in the press, much of it from other ministers who were jealous of his success (over 5,000 flocked to hear him each week). Several denominational pastors wrote that they doubted his conversion (if he differs from God's plan, it should be doubted). Others predicted that he would be like a rocket that would climb high and then drop out of sight. Another asked for proof that Spurgeon was the Lord's servant and that his ministry was heart-searching, Christ-exalting, truth-unfolding, sinner-converting, church-feeding, and soul-saving (C. H. Spurgeon Autobiography [Banner of Truth], 1:305)! Reading that considering the history of denominationalism, makes you sadly laugh because he was sincere, but misled many souls with false doctrine.

Disappointment with God is another cause of discouragement. You prayed and worked for something, but it did not happen. As far as you could tell, it would have been for God's glory if it had come about, but it fell apart. You even had claimed a promise from the Bible as you

prayed and worked, but from your perspective, God didn't keep His promise. You begin to wonder whether you should ever try again to do anything for the Lord.

People try to deal with spiritual discouragement in many wrong ways. Many plunge themselves into other things that they think will bring them fulfillment: entertainment, sports, travel, or their careers. Tragically, some turn to drugs or alcohol or adultery. All these things only dig them deeper in discouragement. A few become so discouraged that they take their own lives.

In Ezra 4:4, we read, "Then the people of the land discouraged the people of Judah, and frightened them from building." The work on rebuilding the temple in Jerusalem stopped for about 16 years. According to Haggai 1:4-9, the people's focus shifted to building their own houses, and they neglected building God's house. If the subject came up, they responded, "We tried that. It didn't work!"

How could this dismal situation be reversed? How could the Lord's people put their discouragement behind them so that they could finish the task of rebuilding the temple? To turn things around, the Lord raised up two prophets, Haggai and Zechariah, who spoke to the people in the name of the God of Israel (Ezra 5:1). Under the renewed leadership of Zerubbabel and Jeshua, the people began to rebuild and in spite of further opposition, the work was finished in a little over four years. So our chapter gives us some clues on how to overcome discouragement in our work for the Lord:

To overcome discouragement, we need a fresh encounter with God's Word, we need to get back to work for Him and to persevere, trusting Him to accomplish His will through us.

1. To overcome discouragement, we need a fresh encounter with God's Word.

Derek Kidner writes, "Like every spiritual advance, from Abraham's to the missionary expansion in Acts, this venture began with a word from the Lord. And in common with the rest, it was quickly tested and threatened" (Ezra & Nehemiah, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries [IVP], p. 53). The Old Testament prophets did not so much expound on God's already-written word; rather, they received new revelation directly from God for His people. When these prophets spoke, the Jewish people realized that God was speaking through them.

We no longer have prophets to give direct revelation from God. But in this case, we have the heart of the prophets' messages preserved for us in the Old Testament canon. When we are discouraged, the thing that will most refresh us is to hear God speaking to us in our particular circumstances through His Word. Although some will testify that the "open the Bible at random" method has worked, I would not recommend it. I recommend reading the Word consecutively or systematically.

There are a number of ways that you can have a fresh encounter with God's Word, but in every case, you must have exposure to that Word. In other words, it won't happen if you never open your Bible. When you are discouraged, you may not feel like getting into the Word,

but you must go against your feelings, if need be, and expose yourself to the Word. You can listen to the Bible on tape or CD. I often find great help reading the sermons of men of God from the past, like Lipscomb, WW Otey, or B.C. Goodpasture. You may need to schedule a special time on a day off to take your Bible and get alone with God. But God speaks to us through His Word, and so you must take the time and effort to expose yourself to it.

When you do, God's Word will do at least four things:

A. GOD'S WORD CONFRONTS OUR SIN.

That is the main thrust of Haggai. He directly confronted the people with their sin of building their own houses while neglecting God's house. God used him to stir up Zerubbabel, Jeshua, and the people so that "they came and worked on the house of the Lord of hosts, their God" (Hag. 1:14).

You may be thinking, "When I'm discouraged, why would I want to be confronted with my sin? That doesn't sound very encouraging!" It may not be pleasant at the moment, but it's the medicine we all need. Sin destroys us and damages those who are close to us. To neglect the Bible because it confronts our sin is like avoiding the doctor when we know that we have cancer. It may not be pleasant to go through the treatment, but without it we will die. Scripture is profitable for reproof and correction (2 Tim. 3:16).

B. GOD'S WORD CONFIRMS HIS GRACE IF WE WILL REPENT.

While Haggai confronted the people's sin, Zechariah gave them hope that God would remember them and keep His covenant promises to send the Messiah. Zechariah's name means "whom the Lord remembers." His father was Berechiah, which means "the Lord blesses." His grandfather (mentioned in Ezra 5:1) was Iddo, which means "at the appointed time." Those three names sum up the message of Zechariah: "Whom the Lord remembers, He blesses at the appointed time."

Although Zechariah was the prophet of hope and encouragement, he began his message by talking about God's fierce wrath because of His people's sin (Zech. 1:2). But immediately he follows it with the Lord's gracious invitation, "'Return to Me,' declares the Lord of hosts, 'that I may return to you,' says the Lord of hosts" (Zech. 1:3). If we will repent, God will be gracious to us.

This is illustrated in our text: Ezra 5:1 is a new, new beginning. The first new beginning was in chapter 3, when the returned exiles gathered in Jerusalem, set up the altar, celebrated the Feast of Booths, and laid the foundation of the temple. Then the opposition discouraged and frightened them, resulting in 16 years of doing nothing about the temple. But now, we have a second new beginning. Thank God that He allows for new, new beginnings, and new, new, new beginnings!

C. GOD'S WORD REORIENTS OUR PRIORITIES UNDER HIS LORDSHIP.

These two prophets spoke “in the name of the God of Israel, who was over them” (5:1). “Them” is grammatically ambiguous. It could and certainly does refer to the prophets, who were under God’s lordship. But it also refers to the people who were God’s chosen nation. Haggai exhorted them to get their priorities in order by putting God’s house first. Wherever we turn in God’s Word, it confronts our skewed priorities. We’re all prone to let the things of this world crowd the things of God out of first place in our lives. The Word keeps calling us back to the basic priority: “Seek first His kingdom and His righteousness” (Matt. 6:33).

D. GOD’S WORD SHOWS US HOW TO LIVE IN A MANNER PLEASING TO HIM.

Without the word from these two prophets, most of the Jews back in the land probably thought that they were doing okay. They may have congratulated themselves for giving up their comfortable lives in Babylon and making the long and dangerous journey across the desert. Perhaps they thought, “Sure, we don’t have a temple yet, but these things take time. The Jews back in Babylon don’t have a temple, either. We’re better off than they are. At least we came back to the land!” But then the prophets spoke and the people realized that to please God, they needed to commit themselves to rebuild His temple.

It’s easy to think that you’re doing okay in the Lord if you compare yourself to other Christians. We always seem to compare ourselves to those who aren’t quite as committed as we see ourselves! But then you come to God’s Word, and it exposes the thoughts and intentions of your heart! You realize that God wants purity in your thought life. He calls you to love Him with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength. You learn that Christ loves the church and gave Himself for her. But you don’t love His church like that! So the Word shows how we need to adjust our thinking, our priorities, and our behavior to please God. To overcome discouragement, we need a fresh encounter with God’s Word.

2. To overcome discouragement, we need to get back to work for the Lord.

Discouragement had led the people to abandon work on the temple for 16 years. These prophets called them back to work. There is something encouraging about serving the Lord, especially if you’ve been on the sidelines for a while. There is the encouragement that He can even use me, in spite of my previous failures. Whether it’s physical labor or being used spiritually in someone’s life, there is joy in knowing that you are laboring for God’s eternal kingdom, and that someday you will hear Him say, “Well done, good and faithful servant.”

One cause of discouragement is that we become self-focused. Often that self-focus generates self-pity and self-justification for why we quit serving the Lord. With Elijah, we begin to say, “I have been very zealous for the Lord,” but everyone else has “forsaken Your covenant, torn down Your altars and killed Your prophets I alone am left; and they seek my life, to take it away” (1 Kings 19:10). That kind of self-focus prevents us from seeing the needs of others and ministering to those needs.

A woman who was very depressed once came to a counselor for advice. After listening for a long time to her problems, he asked, "What is your ministry?" She said, "What did you say?" She had heard me, but she was dumbfounded by the question. After he repeated it, she said that she did not have any ministry and that she had never even thought about the question. He told her that he would be depressed, too, if he'd just sat around thinking about his problems. Go over to the Sunshine Rescue Mission and offer to sweep floors or do dishes. It will do wonders for your discouragement. Get back to work for the Lord!

3. To overcome discouragement, we must persevere in the face of opposition.

As we saw last week, the enemy will not be idle when we make a new beginning with the Lord. No sooner had the people begun to build than Tattenai, the governor over Israel, and his sidekick and their colleagues came and challenged them (5:3). In their defense, they were only doing their job. They reported to King Darius, who began his reign with several challenges to his rule. These men were making sure that the Jews were not plotting rebellion against the king. But even so, the enemy was using them to threaten the people to abandon the work again.

But in this case, they did not demand that the work stop until a word came from the king. Rather, they permitted the people to continue building until such a word came back, which would have taken four or five months. The reason given is, "The eye of their God was on the elders of the Jews" (5:5). Joseph Parker observes, "The eye of the enemy and the eye of God are continually upon us in all the work of life" (Preaching Through the Bible [Baker reprint], 10:174). Knowing that the eye of God is upon us, we can persevere even when the enemy is watching and trying to get us to quit.

Tattenai sent a letter to Darius, which our text quotes. It reveals several interesting things. For one, it is surprisingly accurate. Unlike the letter of 4:11-16, which distorted the truth to make the Jews look worse than they were, this letter just states the facts, asking for verification. I don't know whether the governor assumed that the Jews' story was so far from the truth that the king would easily disprove it, or whether he was a man of integrity who was just doing his job. But he states the Jews' claims accurately and asks the king to confirm or deny those claims.

Also, the letter shows that the Jews gave a strong testimony to Tattenai and his colleagues of God and His ways. They let them know that they were servants of the God of heaven and earth (5:11). They give a brief history of Israel, that formerly they had worshiped at a temple which a great king of Israel [Solomon] had built. But because of their sin, God had given the nation into the hand of Nebuchadnezzar, who destroyed the temple and deported the people to Babylon. But King Cyrus had issued a decree to the Jews to return and rebuild the temple. He had even restored the gold and silver utensils and entrusted them to Sheshbazzar (who was either a co-leader with Zerubbabel or another name for Zerubbabel). Perhaps the Jews even showed these utensils to Tattenai as proof. But the point is, the Jews had given

Tattenai and his colleagues a strong witness about God and His covenant faithfulness to His people.

There is an application for us in overcoming discouragement. One way to persevere in the face of opposition is to give a strong response of our faith in Jesus Christ. That commits us so that we know others will be watching us. If we will be bold for the Lord, we can know that His eye is upon us in whatever response our enemies come back with.

Thus the first thing we need to overcome discouragement is a fresh encounter with God's Word. If our discouragement has caused us to quit, we need to get back to work for Him. And, we need to persevere when opposition hits, as it will, knowing that His eye is upon us. Finally,

4. To overcome discouragement, we need to trust the sovereign God to accomplish His will through us.

Behind these events of the renewal of God's people, God was sovereignly at work. Mervin Breneman writes, "Ezra-Nehemiah constantly reiterates God's providence in the life of his people. The reestablishment of the covenant community was the result of a continuing series of God's providential acts" (The New American Commentary [Broadman], pp. 108-109). The fact that this governor allowed the work on the temple to continue while inquiry was sent to Darius was due to God's eye on His people. Breneman continues, "In order to fulfill his purpose, God used and coordinated the preaching of the prophets, the work of the leaders, the determination of the whole community, and the decisions of 'pagan' government officials" (ibid., p. 109).

It's also obvious that the Jews saw God's sovereign dealings with them in history, and this knowledge enabled them to put the current opposition in proper perspective. As Joseph Parker observes, "They went back to the beginning with certainty, and traced the whole providential line most distinctly and vividly, thus always keeping memory and imagination abreast with the facts on which they relied as proofs of the divine election and rule" (p. 175).

Along the same lines, Breneman applies the Jews' history to us by saying, "The Christian faith is tied to the fact that God made promises and fulfilled them in history, exemplified by Jesus, who actually came, died, and rose again. Although God is sovereign, decisions we make do affect history" (p. 111). As Paul exhorted, "Work out your salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who is at work in you, both to will and to work for His good pleasure" (Phil. 2:12-13). We can know that as we work for the Lord, we are working in harmony with the sovereign God who is working out His purposes in history through His people.

Conclusion

As we'll see in the next lesson, the temple was completed on March 12, 515 B.C. (converting Jewish calendar to our calendar), a little over 70 years after its destruction. There was great joy as the returned exiles gathered there to celebrate the Passover. We read the

source of that joy (6:22): “for the Lord had caused them to rejoice, and had turned the heart of the king of Assyria toward them to encourage them in the work of the house of God, the God of Israel.” When our discouragement is turned to encouragement, it is because of God. He gets all the glory.

To modernize a familiar legend, the devil had a garage sale. He marked all his tools with their appropriate price: hatred, envy, lust, deceit, lying, and pride. Laid apart from all of these was a rather harmless looking but well-worn tool marked much higher than the rest. A buyer pointed to it and asked, “What is that tool?” The devil replied, “That is discouragement.”

“Why is it priced so high?” the man asked.

“Because it is more useful to me than the others. I can pry open a man’s heart with that when I can’t get near to him with the other tools. Once inside, I can make him do whatever I choose. It’s badly worn because I use it on almost everyone. But few know that it belongs to me.”

The devil’s price was so high that the tool of discouragement was never sold. He still uses it on God’s people. By God’s grace, through His Word, we can overcome discouragement. “Therefore, my beloved brethren, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that your toil is not in vain in the Lord” (1 Cor. 15:58).

Discussion Questions

1. Discouragement is a feeling. Are feelings neutral, or can they be sinful? Give biblical support.
2. If God’s Word seems stale to us, how can we break out of the doldrums and have it be fresh again?
3. How can we know what we should be doing in our work for the Lord? How do we figure out what our spiritual gifts are?
4. How can we know when to persevere in our labors for the Lord, or when it’s time to move on to something new?