

How to Deal with Discouragement

Nehemiah 4

Intro

Some say that discouragement is one of the world's most dreaded diseases. Why? Here are some of the reasons. First it is universal – it affects practically every single human being, even believers. Secondly it's reoccurring and you can get discouraged a number of times and it is not a onetime experience. Thirdly it is highly contagious. A discouraged person can affect another by their demeanor, words and actions.

BUT I want to say something that will encourage you. Discouragement is curable. We are going to look at a biblical example and the principles we can learn to apply in our lives.

Story in Nehemiah

I want us to look at the story of Nehemiah in the Old Testament. He was a leader of the Jewish people who had returned to Israel from the Babylonian captivity to rebuild the walls around Jerusalem. Nehemiah led the rebuilding project and when they first started on the wall many were enthusiastic and excited about the project. After awhile when working on the walls they became discouraged.

In Nehemiah 4:6 we read that the people started the project with zeal. *“So we rebuilt the wall till all of it reached half its height, for the people worked with all their heart.”*

But through the project the mood changed. Neh. 4:10-12, *Meanwhile, the people in Judah said, “The strength of the laborers is giving out, and there is so much rubble that we cannot rebuild the wall.”* ¹¹ *Also our enemies said, “Before they know it or see us, we will be right there among them and will kill them and put an end to the work.”* ¹² *Then the Jews who lived near them came and told us ten times over, “Wherever you turn, they will attack us.”*

Does that sound familiar? Their mood changed. Has that ever happened to you?

This story demonstrates for us why people get discouraged. It also teaches us what to do when we feel discouraged and feel like giving up.

Why We Get Discouraged

Why do we at times become discouraged? Here are some causes:

1. Fatigue

The first thing we learn from this story in Nehemiah is fatigue. Look at what the people were saying, *“The strength of the laborers is giving out”* (Neh. 4:10). They had worked themselves to exhaustion. They were just plain tired out – physically, and emotionally drained.

When you're physically or emotionally exhausted, you're a vulnerable candidate to be discouraged. Your defenses are lowered and things can seem bleaker and negative than they really are. This often occurs when you're halfway through a major task or project and you get tired.

Take care of your physical health. Giving your body the care it needs will help you feel less discouraged. Eat a healthy diet, exercise regularly, and get enough sleep. If you need a break -- take

one! You'll be more effective when you return to work. If you're burning the candle at both ends, you're worn out and you are not as bright as you think! Your senses are dulled.

Fatigue is one of the major causes of discouragement and it happens about half way into your task. People are overwhelmed and that's why they leave things unfinished feeling frustrated. Simplify your life and eliminate what isn't necessary. Base your schedule on your priorities. Don't waste time and energy on activities that don't reflect what's most important to you. Freeing yourself from unnecessary tasks will encourage you.

2. Frustration

A second cause of discouragement is frustration. Let's look at Nehemiah 4:10, "*There is so much rubble that we cannot rebuild the wall.*" The builders were discouraged and frustrated over what seemed an overwhelming job. Their problem was that they were trying to build a new wall with so many broken rocks and rubble laying all around their work site. When they focused on the rubble they became discouraged and lost sight of their goal.

When unfinished tasks pile up, it's natural to feel overwhelmed. And when trivial matters or the unexpected interrupt you and prevent you from accomplishing what you really need to do, your frustration can easily produce discouragement.

It's like spring cleaning your home and half way through the task you feel overwhelmed with so much stuff. It seems you never get to the end.

In our affluent world we tend to accumulate a lot of things – garage sales; Christmas and birthday presents; bargain store sales. In the end we hoard all kinds of stuff that we become frustrated in cleaning and we tend to give up.

What is the rubbish in your life? Often it is the trivial unimportant things that waste our time and consume our energy. It's the things that keep us from doing what is really important in life.

You cannot avoid the rubbish in life, but you can learn to simplify your life. Start prioritizing what is important. Your spouse and children; family; being more active in your areas of giftedness in serving God and others etc.

3. Failure

Another reason people get discouraged is failure. Let's look at what the people said in Nehemiah 4:10, "*We cannot rebuild the wall.*" Not only were they tired but they wanted to give up because it looked impossible. They lost heart and gave themselves to failure.

Sometimes, your best laid plans fall apart - the project collapses; the deal falls through; no one shows up to the event. How do you handle failure? Do you give in to self-pity? Do you blame others? As one man said, "Just when I think I can make ends meet - somebody moves the ends!" That's discouraging!

Martin Luther once was so discouraged and depressed over a prolonged period that one day his wife came downstairs wearing all black. Martin Luther said, "Who died?" She said, "God has." He said, "God hasn't died." And she said, "Well, live like it and act like it."

There is a difference between losers and winners. Winners always see failure as being only a temporary setback. That's right! It's not a failure only a setback! It's a stepping stone to learn from and pressing forward. We need to run with that verse in Scripture which says, "*Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead*" (Philippians 3:13).

Also we need one thing to do: "*I can do all this through him who gives me strength*" (Philippians 4:13).

4. Fear

Another reason why people get discouraged is fear. The people during Nehemiah's time expressed this way, "*Our enemies said, 'Before they know it or see us, we will be right there among them and will kill them and put an end to the work.'*" (Neh. 4:11). Apparently there were people in Israel who didn't want the walls rebuilt. They were enemies of the Jews. The high walls around the city would bring safety and a good defense; therefore these enemies didn't want the walls finished. They criticized and ridiculed the Jews believers and then finally threatened to kill them. The builders became discouraged because of fear.

BUT notice who became discouraged. It was the Jews who lived near the enemy. They in turn discouraged others from building the walls. Look with me at Nehemiah 4:12, "*Then the Jews who lived near them came and told us ten times over, 'Wherever you turn, they will attack us.'*" When you hang around a negative person long enough you pick up their negativity and it affects you.

Max Lucado in his book *Facing Your Giants* shares an important observation of hanging around encouraging people. "I discovered the importance of healthy counsel in a triathlon. After the 1.2 mile swim and the 56 mile bike ride, I didn't have much energy left for the 13.1 mile run. Neither did the fellow jogging next to me. I asked him how he was doing and soon regretted posing the question. "This stinks. This race is the dumbest decision I've ever made." He had more complaints than a taxpayer at the IRS. My response to him? "Goodbye." I know if I listened too long, I'd start agreeing with him.

I caught up with a 66-year-old grandmother. Her tone was just the opposite. "You'll finish this," she encouraged. "It's hot, but at least it's not raining. One step at a time...don't forget to hydrate...stay in there." I ran next to her until my heart was lifted and my legs were aching. I finally had to slow down. "No problem." She waved and kept going. Which of these two describes the counsel you seek? (Source: Max Lucado, *Facing Your Giants*, 2006, p. 65).

When people regard our best efforts as unsatisfactory, their displeasure often drags us down. Constant criticism from a family member or coworker can affect how we feel about ourselves. Negative people are discouragers.

Fear is behind more discouragement than we'd like to admit. The fear of criticism, "What will they think?" The fear of responsibility, "What if I can't handle this?" The fear of failure, "What if I blow it?"

Discouragement and disappointment are normal emotions we all experience even as Christians, but it's important to know how to make sure those debilitating emotions don't get the best of us.

Conclusion

Pastor Charles Stanley said, "Disappointments are inevitable; discouragement is a choice." Resist the discouragement fight back! Discouragement is a choice. If you feel discouraged, it's because you've chosen to feel that way. No one is forcing you to feel bad. Hang in there! Do what's right in spite of your feelings. Feelings do not last forever.

Eric Close is an actor from CBS's drama *Without a Trace*. He found faith in God as a student at a Christian school when he was just 13. "I think that age is naturally a time when you are searching, and asking a lot of questions," says Eric.

Eric confesses that in the decade following his time at that Christian school, "I made this decision to go my own way and not follow God." After he graduated from the University of Southern California, he became yet another struggling actor in Los Angeles, looking for a big break. That's when he reevaluated his life. "I was thinking about my future, and I was feeling empty.

Then I started thinking back to when I had accepted Jesus Christ as my Saviour. So I sat there alone in my apartment and prayed. I said, 'I've done everything my own way, but if you'll come back into my life, I'll give you everything.' That's when I really made a commitment to follow him." Eric laughs, "It's been an amazing adventure. There have been times when I have been discouraged, but it helps to know God is always with me." (Source: *Kris Rasmussen, "Getting a Clue in Tinseltown," Christian Reader Jan. 2003*).

Next week I want to talk about the cure for discouragement as we continue to follow Nehemiah's story.